



## The Baptism of Christ: Experiencing a God Who is Well Pleased

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan*

*The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord~January 7, 2018*

### Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day..

### Psalms 29

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| 1 | Ascribe to God, you gods, *<br>ascribe to God glory and strength.                                      |    | and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.   |
| 2 | Ascribe due honor to God's holy Name; *<br>worship the Most High in the beauty of holiness.            | 7  | The voice of God splits the flames of fire;<br>the voice of God shakes the wilderness; *<br>God shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. |
| 3 | The voice of God is upon the waters;<br>the God of glory thunders; *<br>God is upon the mighty waters. | 8  | The voice of God makes the oak trees writhe *<br>and strips the forests bare.  |
| 4 | The voice of God is a powerful voice; *<br>the voice of God is a voice of splendor.                    | 9  | And in the temple of the Holy One*<br>all are crying, "Glory!"   |
| 5 | The voice of God breaks the cedar trees; *<br>God breaks the cedars of Lebanon;                        | 10 | God sits enthroned above the flood; *<br>enthroned as Sovereign for evermore.  |
| 6 | God makes Lebanon skip like a calf, *  | 11 | God shall give strength to the people; *<br>God shall give the people the blessing of peace.                                     |

### Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied —altogether there were about twelve of them.

### Matthew 2:1-12

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

If John were here to do the baptizing today, I think it's highly probable that not many of us would be here. I think we'd probably be a bit terrified by his baptism. You see: John was quite the wild man. Unkempt, filled with fiery passion, and getting people really, really wet. No miniature fonts in sight out in the Judean wilderness. Just a river filled with mucky water. And a prophet filled with zeal.

John was a bit of an abrasive, old-fashioned, kind of prophet, too.

His message was: repent. Turn your life around. Start again. Get back on track. Straighten up and fly right.

So why, you might wonder, were people trekking into the wilderness for this? Was it really worth a long and treacherous trip to hear such bad news about themselves?

Well, maybe.

Then, just as now, people sometimes felt that things were a bit off kilter, weren't going quite right, in their lives and in the world.

They sometimes felt they needed a reboot. A reminder of what was truly important. A renewed dedication to living lives that mattered. Some sort of spiritual kick in the pants.

Sort of like our New Year's resolutions. But even bigger and more holistic than most resolutions...because repentance is about re-orienting and re-ordering the entirety of one's life.

Repent literally means: "to turn around." To set one's face in a different direction. To face, in the case of John's repentance, toward the Holy. And then, necessarily, to confront the question that seems to eternally confound humanity. The question: what does the Lord require of you?

Of course, many answers to this question had already been given by the time John and Jesus came onto the scene.

All sorts of different ways that people could be better at following God's laws. All sorts of ways that people could be better at practicing God's justice.

But still, people so often felt lost, so often felt that they were falling far short of God's dream. It's a big and overwhelming task to follow a God who calls us beyond self-centeredness and into care for the lost, the lonely, and the least. It's a high bar.

So God's people often felt unsure about how much they really had to do in order to measure up. In order to fulfill God's hope that Israel would be a light to the nations and a beacon of God's loving justice to all the earth.

Just what does the Lord require of us?

Here's the thing. God wants everything. God wants the devotion of our whole beings. God wants to re-orient us to what really matters in life. To show us that we can let go of ego, and all the work that it takes to prop up our egos. That we can truly devote ourselves to God's will being done, on earth as it is in heaven.

But mostly, we don't really want this. We don't want to let go and give our lives to God, even though there is so much freedom promised on the other side. We can't help but be endlessly caught up in our projects of self-aggrandizement. Our worries. Our grievances. Our ambitions. Our successes.

We can't help but be human. And God knows this...God knows this.

This, of course, is why God chose to come among us. God entered our condition in Jesus, to incarnate God's boundless empathy for all the ways in which human beings struggle.

God gets it. God knows that we don't quite know how to do it: quite how to be the fullest, richest, most generous versions of ourselves. That it's hard to get off the hamster wheel of our lives to be radically present to the needs of our neighbors.

But rather than giving us a 10-step self-improvement plan for how to be better followers, as we might expect, God does something far more surprising. Indeed, as Jesus comes up out of the baptismal waters, God's voice declares from heaven:

"You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

"You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

And I think... I think this is exactly what God has said and will say as each of us rises from the waters, too. Chuckling to Godself with delight.

This is my daughter, the beloved, with her I am well pleased. This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased. So very, very well pleased.

Sometimes, I wonder if it's all God says. If it's all God sees.

Belovedness. Everywhere. All the time. Without exception.

Because God only knows, human beings can always use a little more love. And that people do amazing things when they know that they're loved. And that love is the foundation of just about every good thing.

So just as Jesus is starting his public ministry God declares him beloved.

Likewise, just as we start to make our way in the world, so often as babies and children, just like those coming to be baptized today, God declares us beloved.

God tells us the truth about ourselves. About who we are. And who we can be. About the fact that we belong. That we have a home in God's family. Because, you see, we are much more, so much more, than the world often wants us to believe. If we could better see our beauty and our goodness, we wouldn't need half of what is so successfully marketed to us. If we could better see the beauty and goodness of one another, we would stumble over ourselves, as we rushed to provide for those in need. But we can't always quite see it.

For years, I had a quote from a Hafiz poem on my bookshelf. It says:

"I wish I could show you,  
When you are lonely or in darkness,  
The astonishing Light  
Of your own Being!"

I think this is part of what God is saying at our baptisms, too. You are beloved, and you are a wonder.

As much as I had mixed feelings about the book and movie called "The Shack," there's a bit in it that I really appreciated.

God, called Papa, and played by Octavia Spencer, has this to say about every human she meets or recollects: I'm especially fond of him. I'm especially fond of her. About every single one.

It's beautiful. This overflow of love.

It's at the core of who God is. Jesus is part and parcel of God's overflow of love. God so wanted to communicate more directly with us, that God came to be with and among us and remains with us forever in and through the Holy Spirit. God wants us. All of us. All the time.

God wants Alex, and Jack, and Julia, and Athen, and Henry.

And so, today, God says to each of them and each of us:

You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased. I love you. Forever and back again. I am especially fond of you. Live now as one who is deeply loved.

Live in the freedom and security of love. And share that love with a world that desperately needs to remember its belovedness.

May it be so, this day and always.

Amen.