



First Sunday after the Epiphany – The Baptism of Our Lord

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Good morning! Good morning and God's blessings on this snowy, wintry morning. I hope everyone is okay and safe after this first heavy, thick snow.

The world remains full of surprises. We teeter on the edge of potential war, now. We mourn with families who lost their loved ones in the recent avalanche in the mountains not far from here. We find nations pulling back from agreements that have helped keep and build a peace and a spirit of cooperation. It could be easy to reel from sorrow to sorrow to sorrow, and to be battered about like a ship in the high waves. But God is not absent. God is calling. God is stirring us. God is still creating, naming, claiming, and placing sacred purpose. At the end of this week, on Saturday, begins the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, a week when we are invited with people of other denominations across the world to pray that God will return us to unity, that our cooperation and mutual affection will grow, that we learn from each other and together may become one in our witness to the Risen Lord Jesus and to the Spirit of Life.

Last week, at the end of our readings in the Lessons and Carols for Epiphany, we came to the edge of the Jordan River with Jesus, where John recognized him. And the last two readings, from Isaiah and from Revelation, opened up some ways for us to view this moment – from inside the heart and mind of Jesus, within his spirit stirring him to come to this place as he follows God's promptings and urgings – and from beyond him as a vision of all the heavenly host, witnessing the dawn of renewal for all creation and all the people of the earth. Stirring and urging Jesus forward from within, captured in the words of Isaiah,

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to*

*proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, to comfort all who mourn.*

And, in God's vision and promise, shining from the future into this present moment, captured in the words from Revelation,

The holy city now has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.

And I asked each of us -- Let your life and light grow and shine forth in the world around you. Do not hold back. And, Let yourself protect life and light, wherever you find it.

So, today, we remember and return to that time when Jesus was baptized. We remember our own baptism as well – although we will not renew our baptismal vows today, because we will do that when Bishop Gretchen is with us on February 2nd. Today, we witness Jesus approach the threshold, cross under the waters, and stand at the moment when he is named, claimed, anointed, immersed – and charged with sacred purpose.

Jesus comes to the threshold. It is a profound threshold – a crossing through from one place to another place in his life – a key moment of shifting in focus, purpose, and even core sense of himself – a shift from build-up and movement toward commitment to a full embrace of commitment and a marking and empowerment to embrace that commitment.

We know such moments, such thresholds, in our lives. It is in those moments like a wedding, when promises felt and built up within are declared, when a future is opened and made real. It is in ceremonies of graduation or of appointment to positions of responsibility, when one path is brought to fulfillment and closure, and one crosses through an open gateway.

We face and approach and cross through many Gateways in our lives – significant moments passing from one time to another in our lives. There are unexpected and sometimes unmarked moments that are still thresholds – those moments when something happened so that our sense of meaning and purpose and identity shifts. In such moments, we become more, we lay aside some of our attachments from before, and we take on what is in store for us ahead in this new place, this new way of seeing and being.

But there is such a profound quality to this moment for Jesus. Jesus senses the heavens open, and the Holy Spirit coming like a dove directly down onto him, and God his Father speaking to him directly and to any who might hear these very direct words. This a profound moment of tenderness and surety – of tender love, adoration, affection, and trust expressed. “This is MY Child, MY beloved, in whom I am so well pleased.” Jesus is embraced and claimed and adored – this is his identity.

Last year, I talked about the power of being named and claimed

This year, I want to remind us again of that power – and of the power of being charged and called.

Our sense of purpose and calling, each day and each season of our lives, is linked to our sense of God-given identity. Who we are called to be in this world arises from God's naming and claiming us and embracing us for who we are – even if we have been afraid, resentful, ashamed, or denying of who we truly are, God sees and knows and names us, embraces us, and calls us forth to be the Light we are created to be.

Does each of us know we are adored and named and claimed by God? I need to let myself sit with this, soak in this, be immersed in and be raised up in this. Just as each of you do as well. You are loved! You are named and claimed! In Christ Jesus, you are God's beloved child. What then will you do with this beloved identity you have been given?

Jesus is embraced and claimed and adored – this is his identity – so, then, what will he do with this identity he has been given and immersed in, given from his birth and now named and claimed and embraced?

This is not the only time that Jesus is named God's Son in the Gospel of Matthew. Right after his baptism, Jesus goes out into the desert, and there faces the Tempter. The Tempter invites Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from this tower." Will Jesus take his identity and give in to the lures of grandiosity and power? Will we?

It is at his death on the cross, after he breathes his last, that he is named and claimed by someone unlikely. The Roman centurion names him, "Truly, this was Son of God." Jesus chose to embrace God's naming and calling as one, and gave himself to who God called him to be, even to giving his life. What will we give to become fully whom God has made us, named us, and called us to be?

Identity is never an alone thing. Jesus is who he is in relationship. He is Son of God. And he is God with us. Remember, to Joseph he is named by the angel, "Immanuel – God with us." This is one of my favorite ways and first treasured ways of understanding who Jesus is. And it is exactly how Jesus IS in the Gospels, and there is this wonderful book-end to Matthew, when Jesus is about to ascend and both charges and claims his disciples "Go, and make disciples of all nations – and lo, **I am with you** always, even to the end of the ages."

"I am with you" – "God with us" – this is what Jesus experienced in hearing God's voice directly and seeing the Spirit come to him – "God is with me, in me, surrounding and flowing through me."

Jesus' first act of ministry, first action taken as an adult as we meet him, is to step through this threshold – and to do so as an act of obedience and submission to the will of God . This kind of submission in heart and mind, in spirit, to God does not mean meekness or weakness in all public action – quite the opposite, it releases a boldness and power and strength in following God's claiming and charge.

At this threshold to which he has come in obedience and has given himself to his Father's urging, Jesus hears and is bathed and immersed in God's delight and claiming of him. The text today from Isaiah 42 helps us hear behind the briefer and more simple words in Matthew. Just as there are words and stories and weaving threads behind the brief things we say to our loved ones, to any we love and care for. So, like an orchestral set of themes behind the Father's voice to Jesus, we hear God's words from Isaiah:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

*I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;*

*I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

Friends, hear the tenderness and completeness of this bold declaration, as God's naming and charging of God's beloved Son. Jesus is seen for who he is and called forth to live that. In Christ, each one of us is God's beloved Child. Together. God with us. God speaking and calling within and among us, "I love you, you are mine, now be what I have made you to be for this world that cries out for what you have to give."