

January 8, 2023: THIS DAY'S SERMON – Baptism of Our Lord

Scripture Readings: Matthew 3:1-17; Psalm 2:7-8

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Let us pray: *Life-giving God, we come before you this morning with gratitude for the life-giving gift of your Word: Written, spoken, Risen and Alive. Transform our hearts with the promise of your daily presence which reminds us that we are deeply loved. Strengthen us, through that promise, to be co-creators with you in bringing about the world of justice and peace that you desire. In the morning, when we rise, give us Jesus—the Saving One who lives within us and walks alongside us each day of our earthly lives. Amen.*

It is hard to believe that it was already – and yet just – two weeks ago that we celebrated, again, the Christ's birth into the world; the laying of a beloved child into the arms of his parents.

Matthew's Gospel jettisons us through the generations of Jesus' ancestors, carrying us rapidly to the point of John the Baptist's pronouncement of Jesus' coming. This culminates in Jesus' baptism and God's naming him as "the Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

Assistant Professor of New Testament Jennifer Vija Pietz reminds us that "to be truly and deeply loved is perhaps the most profound experience that all people long for, whether they realize it or not. Knowing that you are valued and cherished can free you to pursue a purposeful life that involves loving others with the same love you have received. The God who is Love created us to live in and out of this same love."

Prof. Pietz goes on to state that love is, in fact, foundational to God's relationship with Jesus. Even before Jesus proves to be the faithful Son of God by resisting the devil in the wilderness, before he begins to fulfill his messianic mission, God declares his unconditional love for him.

Being God's beloved Son fundamentally defines Jesus. Being God's beloved son, being of God in a unique way, fundamentally defines Jesus. As such, Jesus does not do God's work in order to earn God's love. Even so, it is important to remember that while being God's beloved Son will not spare Jesus from the many trials and injustices of human life, being grounded in this true identity will strengthen him to endure each trial in love and empower him to give new life to the world.

It is, in fact, God's divine love which will motivate and sustain Jesus throughout his ministry to love both those who are hurting and those who will hurt him. A love which will culminate on the cross.

In this scripture, we are reminded of who God declares Jesus

to be. Might we not, in turn, use this as an opportunity to reflect on who we continue to discover and declare Jesus to be in our individual lives and our life together in this new year?

For many of us, I imagine the very first "theology" we ever learned was "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Such a simple song; such a simple statement. Yet, for many of us, while it is the point of beginning our journey with Jesus, it often eventually culminates into the song that we sing on occasion rather than a reality that we carry with us throughout our daily interactions.

Perhaps that is because, as children, this is the Jesus we need – almost an "invisible friend" of sorts; a Jesus who is always there when we need him, who always understands, always comforts, always cares, and never betrays us.

As we grow in wisdom and experience, it can become more and more easy to set that Jesus aside, replacing him with what we view – and hope the world views – as a more mature, adult reflection of our faith. This morning, I am here to suggest that we still need that Jesus – in fact, the world needs that Jesus, too.

One of my greatest joys in serving as a pastor in Canby, Minnesota, was in taking communion to a residential care center – a home – for adults living with disabilities. It was a place and a time where my heart was simultaneously buoyed with the joy that filled it and brought back to earth with the humility that reminded me of God's presence in every part of creation.

We would gather around the table to read some scripture, talk about what it meant to us. We would follow this by talking – every time as if it were the first – about the bread and wine we were about to receive, and then we would share it together. We never ended our time together without singing "Jesus Loves Me."

This was the moment I always waited for. One of the beautiful sweet souls who called that place home would sing this song, beaming with joy. She would lift in her seat as her voice rose to dramatic crescendo with the final stanza, her delicate hand moving like that of a conductor, "for the Bible tells me so...sooo...sooooo"! I swear the light of Jesus beamed right out of her in that moment, culminating in a time of almost stunned silence.

In the heaviness of what can often be the life that carried me to that moment, I would find myself warmed by the light of that sweet angelic soul. Warmed and humbled and reassured

and reminded that all any of us truly needs to engage and endure and embrace this complicated earthly life is found in God's revelation of love for the world made flesh in Jesus.

Through this one meek individual's visible expression of knowing and loving Jesus as pure joy, pure trust, pure faith ... pure love, I always left knowing that at both the beginning and end of the day, what we need is quite simple: We need Jesus.

And, thanks be to God, Jesus is what God gives us. Every single day. A Jesus who, as I love reminding the little children, loves us and walks with us every day. I know it sounds trite, and I am likely preaching to the choir here, but do you truly know that? Do you truly believe it? That Jesus loves you and walks with you every day?

At his baptism, God claimed Jesus and declared him to be a beloved child. As the one who rose from the waters of his baptism, Jesus would later proclaim that from the heart of those who believe in him would flow rivers of living water. In that one – in Jesus – God declares our true identity, as beloved sons and daughters, created and claimed to pursue a purposeful life that involves loving others with the same love we have received. The God who is Love created us to live in and out of this same love.

Just as being God's beloved Son fundamentally defines Jesus, so it defines us. Like Jesus, we will not be spared the trials and injustices of human life, but being grounded in our true identity will strengthen us to endure each trial in love and empower us to give new life to the world.

May you travel through your days remembering that Jesus loves you and walks with you every day. And with Jesus within you and beside you, you are not relegated to merely experiencing this life as it happens to you. You are empowered to participate in shaping the life God is creating in you and in the world. May we rise each morning, grateful that God gives us Jesus ... and let the rivers of living water flow.

Amen.