

## **“Illuminating Identity: Who and Whose You Are”**

*A sermon preached on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 by Emily Hull McGee  
on January 13, 2019 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

One of the most special gifts I opened this Christmas was given to Annabelle and me from my parents. She tore into the wrapping paper, and I opened the box to find a stack of homemade dresses whose cheerful fabrics and girlish patterns I recognized from the deepest recesses of my memories. They were mine, treasured because they were made for me as a young girl by my Grandmother Wylodine, a beautiful seamstress in the decades before her eyesight dimmed and she had to stop.

As I held them on Christmas Day, flashes of memory accompanied the moment. I remembered the days standing still for what felt like hours in her lovely home, watching her flutter around my feet pinning and measuring and making sure she had it right. I remembered twirling and skipping and leaping down long church hallways, delighted for the chance to finally show off her creation. I remembered early trips to the fabric store where she had me pick out some favorites. I remembered the preteen years when I started longing for store-bought instead.

In the haze of holiday bows and clutter and noise, the dresses didn't seem to capture Annabelle's imagination as they did mine, but a week or so later, she spotted them hanging on the door of her closet and was entranced. "Ohhh, this is so PRETTY!! I want to wear it!" she announced Tuesday a week ago. It took her but a few moments to pull out a pair of pink tights and find her Sunday shoes, and she had her Sunday outfit ready far earlier than I had

my Sunday sermon ready! I watched her last Sunday: twirling, skipping, leaping down the hallways; grinning as she heard me share with some of you the origin of her dress; reminding me, “mommy, I’m wearing YOUR dress!”

We took a quick photo after church, Annabelle and I, and sent it to my parents. “She’s your spittin’ image,” Mom said. And in a moment, my girl and I nestled into one another, delighting together to both be known and found and filled with an unmistakable sense of remembering who and whose we are.

## II.

You know by now that we’re in the season of Epiphany, these winter weeks between Christmas and Lent when we look for the light, for the revelation of God in this world profoundly through Jesus. Our lectionary texts this Epiphany season illuminate for us the identity of Jesus. The spotlight that shone on the manger in Bethlehem grows during this season to include the disciples and the crowds, broadens to capture the neighbors and the enemies, all trying to figure out who this Jesus is and why his words and witness matter. Like that growing light, as one pastor says, “[Epiphany] is like a stone that is dropped in the water, which sets off a series of concentric ripples that get bigger and bigger and bigger until the entire surface imperceptibly is witness to the initial movement of that stone.”<sup>1</sup> The season of Epiphany allows us to join our ancient ancestors to discover who Jesus is, where to find him, when he’s speaking and healing and moving, and what it all means. And in so doing this year, we might just find ourselves along the way.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Gomes, *Sermons*, p31.

In the liturgical year, we call today 'Baptism of the Lord Sunday,' when we remember Jesus's baptism and what it means for his life and ours. It's a story we know to be important because it's in all the gospel accounts. But curiously, each gospel writer shares the story a little differently: Matthew with high drama, Mark with immediacy and brevity, John with a glancing nod, and Luke with all its earthy relatability. Today's scripture reading from the Gospel of Luke situates us first with John the Baptist, preaching his gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to the people who followed him. "Is he the Messiah?" the people wondered, "Is he the one we've been waiting for?" John knew better and named it: "I baptize with water," he said, "but there is one who is coming more powerful than I, one who I am not worthy to untie his sandals, one who will baptize you with Spirit and fire."

In my imagination of that scene, I can see John: rough around the edges, uncompromising, and even offensive at times, but proclaiming good news too liberating to ignore. I can see the crowds: "filled with expectation" and "questioning," the text says, but alive with possibility at this one who is to come. In my mind, this scene could have practically unfolded on the banks of the river itself, John teaching the people about baptism in between immersions. "I baptize you with water," I could hear him saying, his voice cracking with overuse, "but one more powerful than I is coming." And as I've always thought about this story, in my mind John just continues, "... and here he is, Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth, slipping into the back of the line!" The sermon illustration himself, right there in the flesh.

But that isn't, it seems, the way things unfolded. For in the verses left out by the lectionary reading in between John's sermon and Jesus's baptism,

John was imprisoned by Herod for preaching messages that were too political and too indicting of Herod's behavior for the king's comfort. And as the text continues, we find the crowds at the water: at the dirty farmers and the anxious parents, the self-assured leaders and the chronically ill, the ones whose hunger for meaning is written all over their face and the ones who now eye Jesus in the baptismal line with them with skepticism oozing from their pores.

### III.

You know, I look at the shoreline: at the dirty farmers and the anxious parents, self-assured leaders and the chronically ill, people with hopes and issues and baggage and need. I look at that shoreline at the baptismal crowd, and it's not too different from what I see anytime I go to a football game, or engage in a march or parade, or stroll through the mall at Christmas, or scroll through my Twitter feed. It's not too different from this moment right now, as I look out upon you dear church.

For any crowd is filled with names, descriptors that identify to others — either of one's own choice or not — who we are. They brand our bodies and our ideologies, our backgrounds and our baggage, our friends and our location. They finish our sentences, spoken and silent, when we say in thought or word, 'I am...'

I am...

Shy. Needy. Wise. Immature. Mom. Dad. Sister. Brother. Childless. Aunt. Uncle. Grandparent. Child. Friend. Agitator. Mentor. Student. Democrat. Republican. Independent. Libertarian. Socialist. Older. Younger. Inexperienced. Irrelevant. Privileged. Oppressed. African. Asian. Latina.

American. Native. Southern. Northern. Midwestern. Coastal. Yankee.  
Redneck. Gay. Lesbian. Trans. Queer. Questioning. Smart. Clueless. Heavy.  
Skinny. Disabled. Athlete. Addict. Workaholic. Helpful. Helpless. Homeless.  
Homemaker. Guest. Other. Refugee. Illegal. Educated. Street smart. White  
collar. Blue collar. Veteran. Pacifist. Retired. Widow. Curious. Consumer.  
Depressed. Liar. Successful. Failure. Sick. Dying. Radical. Compromising.  
Poor. Engaged. Divorced. Convict. Citizen.

We strain under the weight of these designations when they are foisted upon us, but so often we choke on these words as we speak them to ourselves. For time and time again, we construct a limited identity for ourselves based on a scale we have not used to measure it, constraints we could not choose to limit it, descriptors we know are not complete, and decisions we wish to make again. Even when the names we give ourselves are ones that stir up feelings of pride or place or purpose — names of our family, our roles, our jobs — somehow the longings of our heart too deep for a designation cause us to find ourselves back again wondering, “who am I?”

And then, unsettled and unsure, we find ourselves wondering: “where do I fit?” “To whom do I belong?” Is it to ideology or political party, or perhaps to university or creed? Is it to location or ancestry, or maybe to those who share my name, my gender, my orientation, my age, my skin color, my outlook on life, my convictions? Do I belong to my past or my future? Am I more myself when I’m part of this friend or that friend, this team or that territory, this church or that club, this way of thinking or that way of living?

*Who am I? To whom do I belong?* The answers we find, whether true and meaningful or limiting and narrow, always seem to come up short.

**Because deeper and truer than any name we may adopt, any creed we may claim, any role we may inhabit, or any group we may join is the truth that, like Jesus, it is in our baptism that we most fully find ourselves.** In our baptism, we belong to God. In our baptism, we are called beloved. In our baptism, we are named and claimed by One deeper and truer than any other force in the world. In our baptism, we discover who and whose we are. **For we are God's, and we are beloved!**

#### IV.

“When all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,” Luke said, as if Jesus was just your average Joe in the back of the line, “the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’

The early church had a hard time with this story, fluttering about and fretting about what it means that the sinless one submitted to baptism, a symbol of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But as one who simply stepped into line with the nervous and the needy, the powerful and the powerless, in his baptism, Jesus found himself. In his baptism, Jesus belonged to God. In his baptism, Jesus was called beloved, one in whom God delights. In his baptism, Jesus was named and claimed by God. For the God who came to dwell among us means that God comes and gets “in the river with us, in the flesh with us, in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of new life with us.”<sup>2</sup> God’s spittin’ image — ‘Spirit and image’ — right there like you and me, remembering who and whose he was.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p35.

The great church reformer Martin Luther wrote about baptism all those hundreds of years ago, and he encouraged Christians to remember their baptism every time they engaged with water. “Do it as often as you can,” Luther would say, even as you wash your face in the morning. Perhaps that’s why in his frequent down or depressed days — (good to be reminded that we all have them, even Martin Luther!) — he would summon a spirit of comfort and say to himself: “Martin, be calm, you are baptized.”<sup>3</sup> It was as if in the swirl of everyday life, even Martin Luther needed the reminder of his identity, a reminder of who and whose he was.

Martin Luther needed that reminder. And honestly, Jesus needed that reminder too. It’s no accident that from his baptism, he’d go into the wilderness to be tested by the Temptor. He’d begin his ministry and be run out of his hometown. He’d anger the Pharisees and shake up the establishment. He’d find himself in the garden, abandoned and alone. But in every step along the way, the water of life infused by the Spirit clung to him, reminding him that he was beloved and that he belonged to God.

You and I certainly need that reminder. As we go through our days, as we’re named and claimed by others, by systems, by illnesses, by tragedy, as we shift in and out of roles, as we grow out of the clothes we once were given, might the waters of baptism cling to us too, such that we never forget: in our baptism, we know who and whose we are. We are God’s, and we are beloved!

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<sup>3</sup> Story as told by Rachel Held Evans in her chapter, “Believers Baptism,” *Searching for Sunday*, p14. Additional information about Martin Luther’s theology of baptism from his classic work, *The Babylonian Exile of the Church*.

## V.

Someday my girl will outgrow those old dresses. Someday the twirling will shift to texting, and she'll long for store-bought. Someday she'll be embarrassed by her mama who flutters all around her. If she's anything like her mother in early adulthood, she'll want to distance herself from who and what she knows, hungering to step into life's great adventures into uncharted terrain with a new cast of characters by her side. She'll shed the fabrics of her past to weave a new tapestry with her life: curious but familiar to those who gave her her name. Like a new dress, she'll try on identities to see what fits; she'll shift in and out of roles to see what feels right; she'll attach to groups, to passions, to beliefs, figuring out which is the right match.

Even when her mama will cling to the memory of this season, in the end, the deepest longing of my heart is that the waters of baptism she'll hopefully one day enter will cling to *her* and allow her to remember: remember that she belongs to God, remember she is beloved by God, and remember that in her, God is well pleased. What a gift it would be! Amen.