

Home By Another Way: Baptized

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 3:1-17
on January 8, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

If you've been following our worship themes this school year, you know we've been exploring the language, "On the Way." After a fall spent unpacking the various parts of the journey, and Advent connecting where we're going to where we've been, this new year opens a new door for us to continue our path. As we continue our year of "On the Way," our January series will explore the idea of traveling with Jesus "home by another way." Richard Groves started us off so well last week, and from now until Easter, we'll walk with Jesus through the Gospel of Matthew. Next Sunday, we'll meet Jesus in the wilderness and be tempted alongside him. Then we'll step onto the beach alongside the disciples and be called by him. Later we'll follow him in ministry to be sent from him. But today we plunge into the river to be baptized with him.

II.

Baptism's biblical history is a rich one. We look at the Old Testament, and find narratives like the story of creation, Noah and the great flood, and Moses and the Red Sea captured within the lens of baptism. We look at the New Testament, at stories of baptism pouring through Acts – like the three thousand baptized on the day of Pentecost and memorable individuals like the Ethiopian eunuch and Lydia, jailers and haters, none more notable than Paul himself.

But no story is more formative to the long-held practice of baptism than that of Jesus's. John the Baptizer comes first, Matthew tells us, that wild-eyed prophet calling for baptism for the repentance of sins because

God's kingdom has come near. No one was omitted from the call to the waters – religious insiders and outsiders alike. Not even Jesus. For in the Gospel of Matthew, before Jesus does anything at all, his very first act of ministry was to enter in: to wade in the water with the very people he came to liberate, as a friend of mine says, “to risk guilt by association with all the sinners waiting in line.”¹ That very point has confounded scholars and confused the faithful and rankled the orthodox for generations. If baptism was a practice held for those confessing their desire to turn away from sin, then why did a sinless Jesus need to be baptized?

Yet Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, begotten of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, took his place in the water that day. And there, first, foundationally, before anything else, before the sick and the hurting came to him, before the disciples followed him, before the religious leaders conspired against them, before the crowds turned on him, before his friends left him alone, before the cross held him, before the tomb released him, Jesus was baptized. The skies opened, the dove descended, and God's blessing of belovedness washed over him like a cool shower on a warm day – the first word he's told was a word of God's delight: “this is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased.”

III.

It can't help but to make me think of the words we're told in this life – the words that spill through our days and splinter our relationships and stir our anxieties and summon our truth, words that convey the pains of the human experience, and the ache of belonging.

But you don't need those words. You don't need me to tell you how hard this life is. You don't need me to tell you about money worries or

¹ Thanks to dear friend, Rev. Greg Dover, for this one!

relationship problems, wondering if your job will survive the layoffs or if your kid will survive the teenage years. You don't need me to tell you about the perils of injustice or the stain of racism, the threats to democracy or the dismantling of decency, the chasm between right and left, red and blue, or the tears in our common fabric. You don't need me to tell you about our imperiled planet or our underfunded schools, diminishing human rights or debilitating costs for health care, the greed of a few at the expense of the many, the fear of violence and the violence of fear. You don't need me to tell you about the crushing grip of addiction, the immovable weight of depression, the spare exile of isolation, the keeping-score of trauma. You don't need me to tell you what it feels like to wake up and wonder, "does my life have meaning and purpose? Do the things I do every day matter in the grand scheme of things? Can I find it in me to forgive? Can I finally stop running and regretting and procrastinating and hiding and lying to myself? Have I done enough? Am I worthy of love?"

You don't need me to tell you about these things. You **know** them. You **live** them. You worry about them and read about them and talk about them and wonder about them. I get it; I do too. These problems and pains are in the water, aren't they?

You don't need me to tell you about these things. **But perhaps you do need me to tell you this:** from the very beginning until the very end, you belong to God. There is never a moment that God does not see you and know you as their beloved child. Nothing you have done or left undone has or will ever take that belovedness from you. Your belovedness: it's in the water too. For our *baptism* tells us so.

IV.

One of the most potent reminders of the power of words to convey being seen came for me from a beloved friend with whom I was journeying through the conclusion of one season and the beginning of another. For three years, my friend Sarah and I had been inseparable in Chicago. It was an expansive season for us both, one of following dreams and imagining big possibilities as one often does in your early 20s. Together with a dozen of our classmates, we had arrived from all over the world to pursue our careers in voice performance – seeking the elusive goal of getting paid to sing opera, imagine that! It was one of the most intense and transformative seasons of my life.

Yet as grad school turned toward graduation and gainful employment, as the cozy cocoon of the Northwestern University School of Music readied us to launch, and as the realities of the business of singing began to cloud the dream of making music, my friends and I faced a reckoning. Would we stay or would we go? Not just in Chicago itself, but in the field. In the pursuit. In the hustle. Would we fully inhabit the demands, the risk, the identity of a professional singer, or would we slip back into who and where we were before?

In that dizzying time of discernment, Sarah and I had each heard a new call announcing itself. Having witnessed some of the substantial injustices one sees in a city of that size, she felt an invitation to take her whip-smart mind and magnanimous heart back to her hometown of Denver and go to law school, enabling her to pursue a life of justice and beauty for all people. And having heard the equal parts pain and joy of so many of my artist friends who'd been rejected from their churches as they came to themselves and understood more fully who God had made them to be, I felt a call to seminary,

to cross the country again and plant myself among the quirky yet defiantly-hopeful pilgrims of Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

Once firmly rooted in our new paths, we'd later acknowledge to each other the whiplash feel of this change. "Some days, our time in Chicago feels like a dream," we'd share with each other. "Like, did it actually happen?"

Yet as if she knew what such a distinct shift in identity would mean, as if she understood what feelings would emerge as we both took a third way – not the way forward as professional singers or the way back to what we'd done before, but a new way, going home to ourselves by another way, as if she anticipated the nights we'd soon wonder, "did I make a mistake? Should I have stayed? Is this really what I'm supposed to be doing? Is this who I'm supposed to be?" Sarah gave me a gift as we stood by our respective UHauls full of Ikea furniture and far too many boxes of books. It was a simple frame with a picture of the two of us inside, but just below it, a quote I'd never heard but that instantly nestled into my spirit: "a friend is someone who knows the song in your heart, and can sing it back to you when you've forgotten the words."

V.

As potent as a beautiful quote shared between friends can be, it is but a glimpse of what sharing of beloved community among the baptized can be. At her best, the church is the choir who knows the song of belovedness in each of our hearts and sings it for each other when – inevitably, daily – one forgets the words. We do this for each other, don't we? I have the privilege of a front row seat, but I can say with absolute certainty that you have done this for Liam! You sing the song for him with every affirmation you offered him on Tuesday night prayer call, every story you've taught him in Sunday School, every interested question you've asked him after worship. We sing the song

for each other with every casserole or Door Dash delivered, every care note or text sent, every prayer offered and warm embrace extended. We sing the song for each other every time we own up to our mistakes and ask for forgiveness, every time we hear another's story and share our own "me too," every time we take a risk for the sake of relationship and tend it with care. *Belovedness: it's in the water too.*

My former pastor Joe used to tell a story about a preacher friend of his. In the great tradition of the Black church, this preacher knew nothing of a crisp, three-point, 18 minute sermon favored by so many of his white mainline Protestant friends (to say nothing of the 8-9 minute Catholic homily on the way to communion!). His church looked with a knowing smile to their majority-white neighbor churches who made it out the door in time to beat the Methodists to the K & W. Joe asked him one time, "friend, why do you preach so long? Why does your worship last for hours? My congregation would revolt?"

"Oh no no no," his friend responded. "You don't understand. All week long, this world tells my people who they are. This world tells them how they're not enough, and what limits are put on their dreams, and who they can and cannot be, and where they can and cannot go. We worship longer, because it takes a while to undo all that we've been told. We worship longer, because it just takes that long to remember who and whose we are."²

VI.

Friends, baptism contains multitudes. It is the "outward sign of an invisible grace," as our friend Bill Leonard claims, the way we celebrate together what God has done for one. Because baptism represents an

² As preached by Rev. Joe Phelps, my beloved friend and mentor, in many a sermon to Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

individual decision between you and God, of course, but it's inherently a shared act. There's a reason you can't baptize yourselves, for baptism needs the act of communal witness in order to make it whole. Baptism immerses us with the cleansing grace of God, grace that is greater than all our sins. Baptism binds us together as a body of Christ, uniting us, in the words of Ephesians, as "one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." As some traditions' baptismal liturgies say, baptism "buries us with Christ's death and raises us to walk in newness of life." And as Jesus models, baptism locates us in the water together, stirring up the mud right at the heart of God. In our baptism, we've been through the water. Out of many, one. From ordinary water, transformation.

Yet what I want you to hear clearly today is that baptism fundamentally orients us. It identifies us. It marks us. It claims us. It welcomes, as one writer names, "a particular kind of identity and life that can flow out of the reality of being baptized."³

Actually let me clarify – baptism doesn't claim us, God does. Baptism doesn't identify us, Jesus does. Baptism doesn't mark us, grace does. Yet it's through this ancient ritual that the song in our hearts can be heard. It's through the community of the baptized that such a song can be sung back to us when we forget the words. *What song exactly?*, you might wonder. Well you know the one. The song that despite it all, refuses to be silenced. The song that even Jesus needed to hear. The song sung by the voice that sounds like home. "This is my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Amen.

³ Kevin J. Adams, *Living Under Water: Baptism as a Way of Life*, p8.

