

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Beloved Belonging**

Matthew 3:13-17

In the span of just three chapters, we've gone from Jesus' birth to Jesus' baptism. Approximately three decades have passed since Joseph, Mary, and their son fled from Herod into Egyptian exile and eventually returned to settle in the region of Galilee. Now Matthew tells us that Jesus made the journey from Galilee to the Jordan River, where John was holding a service of baptism.

On this occasion, things were a little safer than they would become nearly twenty centuries later. Between 1967 and 1971, during a period of war, Israel placed approximately 6,500 landmines on the western bank of the Jordan River. As of about five years ago, minesweepers had removed a large percentage of the charges, and I assume that by now they've all been cleared. This has helped open the way for hundreds of thousands of visitors, many of them Christian pilgrims, who have come to visit the place where our Lord was baptized.

One of them was Christian rapper Lecrae who, though he had already been baptized, donned a white robe and stepped into the Jordan back in 2019. He posted a video and some photos, along with a message that read: "Today we got baptized in the Jordan River. The one John baptized Jesus in. I was joking before I got dipped and I said if a bird lands out here like the dove on Jesus, bruh....I'm gonna have a heart attack. Just take me to heaven cause God is speaking too loud!"<sup>1</sup>

"And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (v. 17). Matthew doesn't give us any details about the volume of the voice, its accent, or the inflection of the words. Back in 2006, a Christian publisher produced an audio Bible, including background music and sound effects, hoping to reach a younger generation that might be less interested in opening the physical pages of the Scriptures. It was called *Inspired By ... The Bible Experience*, and included an all-black cast, each of whom took on the characters of the Bible. The Holy Trinity had some familiar voices. Actor Blair Underwood performed the role of Jesus. Pastor Bishop T. D. Jakes performed the part of the Holy Spirit. And the role of God the Father was played by Samuel L. Jackson. You may recognize him from various TV shows and movies, or from the Capital One credit card commercials, which culminate with his asking, "What's in your wallet?"

At the baptism of Jesus, God doesn't pose a question. Instead, he makes a declaration. He announces the identity of Jesus. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." It's important to note that this acclamation probably alludes to other Scriptures which point to Jesus' mission as the Messiah. In other words, this voice from heaven isn't just declaring who Jesus is and what he will do, but how he will do it. The one who is sent to save God's people from their sins will accomplish his mission through suffering. The "beloved" Son will reveal the love of God through his self-giving faithfulness and obedience, most of all in his death. So just two chapters after hearing about Christ's cradle, we're already starting to get signals about his cross.

Even Jesus' presence there in the water with John the Baptist signals that God will not redeem his people and remake humankind by keeping his distance and waving a wand over the world, but by actually coming into the world. Coming all the way into an obscure manger in Bethlehem. Coming all the way into the muddy waters of the Jordan, where he stands in solidarity with sinners. It's no wonder that John resists Jesus' request to be baptized. "Me baptize you," says John. "You're the one who should be baptizing me!" But Jesus tells him that this needs to happen. It needs to happen in order for God's plan to be fulfilled. This moment is part of what God intends in order to set things right in his lost and broken world.

But surely there could have been other ways of achieving the same end. Couldn't Jesus have just stood on the riverbank as a pious participant, shouting "Amen" as each person came up out of the water? Couldn't he have just prayed for those who came seeking baptism and renewal? Couldn't he have just stayed at home and watched the service online, posting his praises on social media? But instead, we have a Savior who's prepared to stand knee deep, or deeper, in solidarity with sinners, not because he needs to repent but because we do. As we heard at his birth, he truly is Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23).

With us because he loves us. "My Son, whom I love." When God announces who Jesus is, he puts the stress on Jesus' "belovedness." Jesus isn't simply the Father's Son; he's the Father's "beloved" Son. Jesus is the object of God's love, the one with whom God is "well pleased." I like the way that Eugene Peterson renders God's declaration: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life."<sup>2</sup> Who Jesus is, and what he is doing, will unfold further as the story of his life, death, and resurrection unfolds. But here at his baptism, the launch of his public ministry, it's critical to know that Jesus is defined by the love the Father has for him. God's love is what makes him who he is. God's love will determine the course of his life and mission. And most of all, God's love will be unveiled in the depths of Christ's sacrifice to redeem us from our sins.

One of the reasons baptism holds such an important place in the life of a Christian is because it reminds us that your relationship with God isn't grounded in your ability to love God or lead a holy life. Rather, your relationship with God is grounded in God's eternal love and grace. Rather than abandon us to our unfaithfulness and disobedience, God comes to us in Christ, who stands in solidarity with sinners. Jesus identifies himself with us, so that we can be identified with him, and be defined by our relationship with him. You're not beloved by God because of who you are and what you've done but because of who Jesus is and what he has done for you. Before you've turned to God he has already turned toward you in Christ. Before you've given yourself to God he has given you himself in Christ. Being beloved isn't your achievement. It's God's gift.

And with this sense of being beloved comes a sense of belonging. Belonging to God. Belonging to the community of God's people. The story of Jesus' baptism reminds us that God's grace and saving love have bound us to him and to one another in the fellowship of disciples.

In the Disney movie *Toy Story*, Woody (a plush toy cowboy) confronts Buzz Lightyear (a toy astronaut) with the fact that he is only an action figure and not really a space hero. At one point earlier in the film, Woody shouts, "You're not a space ranger! You're an action figure—a child's plaything." After failing in an attempt to fly, Buzz realizes the truth of Woody's statement. Sad and disillusioned, he hangs his head in resignation, declaring, "I'm just a stupid, little, insignificant toy." Later, Woody tries to comfort Buzz by underscoring the love of the boy who owns them both. "You must not be thinking clearly. Look, over in that house, there's a kid who thinks you're the greatest, and it's not because you're a space

toy; it's because you're his." Buzz lifts his foot and sees a label affixed to the bottom of his little shoe. There in permanent black ink is the name of the little boy to whom he belongs. When Buzz sees the image of his owner, he breaks into a smile and takes on a new determination.<sup>3</sup>

Knowing that you're loved by God, that you belong to God, and that you belong to the community of God's people, gives strength to your heart and direction to your life. Each day, you rise up out of the old life and move further into the new life of Christ, ready to do your part in the ongoing mission of God in the world. Remember that the Holy Spirit who descended upon Jesus rests upon you too, equipping you with the grace and power you need to demonstrate the saving love of Christ and to help bring in the justice and peace of God's reign.

Preacher David Lose reflects on some happiness research that was done several years ago, revealing some of the factors that contribute to human flourishing and to a greater sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in life. Lose summarizes the findings this way:

While the research covers a lot of ground and is certainly nuanced at points, much of the data seem to overlap at a deceptively simple conclusion: whatever else may be helpful—health, wealth, and what not—two things are absolutely essential to feel happy: 1) a sense of belonging to a community and 2) the belief that what you do matters. Those are the two key predictors of fulfillment and productivity: belonging and purpose.<sup>4</sup>

Within the life of the Christian community, there are all sorts of perspectives and opinions about the nature and practice of baptism. But there seems to be pretty widespread unity around the conviction that baptism points to how God's saving grace in Christ makes a decisive claim upon our lives. In other words, God refuses to leave us in our sinful state. We're not left to ourselves, to define who we are on our own. No, we only know who we are by knowing who Jesus is. He is the beloved Son who through baptism numbers himself among the transgressors and identifies himself with us for our salvation. In and through Jesus, we see how God claims us as his own and loves us into existence as his children.

And he has given us this part of his family called the local church. Being a church means we're people who belong to Christ, and to each other. In fact, we still use the language of belonging to describe our relationship to the congregation. At some point, you've probably asked or answered the question, "What church do you belong to?" Of course, belonging means more than just being on the church's membership roll. It means feeling closely connected to Christ and to the people in the congregation. It means that you've put down some spiritual roots, that you've invested yourself, that you've given yourself, that you've formed a bond of fellowship with others. It means that your identity and your purpose are bound up with your relationship with Christ and your involvement in the congregation. You're not just present in the pew. You have a growing, deepening sense that you're beloved and that you belong.

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Shellnut, "Lecrae Gets Baptized Again in the Jordan River." *Christianity Today*. September 24, 2019 (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/september/lecræ-gets-baptized-again-in-jordan-river-israel-collectiv.html>) (January 25, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 13.

<sup>3</sup> As summarized by Greg Asimakoupoulos. Preaching Today website. Accessed October 14, 2020 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2001/may/13058.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> David Lose, "Peter and the Pursuit of Happiness." Working Preacher website. April 12, 2010. Accessed April 29, 2015 <<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1537>>.