

The Sunday after the Epiphany
The Baptism of Our Lord
January 8, 2023

SO BLESSED

This morning I'd like to begin this part of our time together by asking you two questions to which I invite your response. The first question is, "When you think of your baptism what does it mean to you?" I don't think about my baptism every day but when I do, it means something to me. What about you? What does your baptism mean to you?

And my second question is this, "What do you think Jesus might have been feeling during his baptism...the water, the dove, the voice...the whole thing. What was he feeling?"

I'd like to tell you a story. I call it my Joel story. I come from a large family...Jack, Jim, Judy, Joel, Jerry, Joy, Jeff. Joel is 2-2 ½ years older than me. And as I was going through junior and senior high I worshiped him. I wanted to be just like him.

One summer Joel was a counselor on the staff of a church camp, Camp Vermillion, that all of us kids attended. On a Friday night--our last night together--we'd just enjoyed our big closing banquet and now we moved on to the entertainment. We gathered in a beautiful big lodge with a stage on one end and a huge fireplace on the other and a few chairs around the edge. We teenagers, some 75-100 of us, sat on the floor.

At the talent show some of us were brave or foolish enough to share something of ourselves. I sang a song from Jesus Christ Superstar. When I finished the room was absolutely still--for what seemed like an eternity. Then, with his big booming voice from the back of the room, Joel said three words. He said, "That's....my...brother." And everyone went wild! They were whooping and hollering and stomping their feet and doing the wave. It went on and on! Actually though, I don't know how long. I just know what I felt like...I felt fantastic! I felt so blessed!

I think that's what Jesus felt in the experience of his baptism. He must have felt so blessed. The voice, the dove, the words, "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

But there's more. If we look at this life that we live from a psychological point of view, one of the driving motivations in us is fear. Fear that leads to doubt. Doubt that may take its most devastating form of all in self-doubt. Doubt that can lead to indecision. And that indecision can lead to a sort of paralysis. And then we don't challenge or change the things of which we are afraid in the first place.

But the Bible, in 1 John 4 says, "Perfect love casts out fear." Now, the word 'perfect' here is perhaps not the best translation of the Greek. Maybe something like 'complete' or 'unconditional' would be better. And a good working definition of unconditional love is this: Unconditional love is the kind that's there before anything and after everything--before anything and after everything--the kind of love Jesus experienced in his baptism.

Though unique to him, this moment was not exclusive to Jesus. No. As a matter of fact, while it may have been an impromptu and serendipitous moment in this case, this experience was a classic 'naming ceremony' and naming ceremonies have been part of culture since the beginning of time. Three things take place in a naming ceremony. One is the naming of the individual. Two is the claim of that individual. And three is the affirmation of that individual. Notice in this text we see all three. "This is my son..." Jesus is claimed. "...the beloved..." He is named. "...with whom I am well pleased." He's affirmed.

We know this had an incredible effect upon Jesus because of what follows. We know that a feeling he likely felt in that baptismal moment was that he was so blessed. We also know that he took it a step further. He felt "Blessed so..." Blessed so that he could give his life to that kind of love. This was a love worth living for. It was a kind of love worth dying for.

Sometimes I think we forget that Jesus was a human being just like us. The Bible says he was just like us "accept without sinning." He was just a person. That means he experienced the full range of life that you and I do on any given day...situations, emotions, reactions...he was just like us. And in this particular situation--his baptism--he had to make a pivotal decision. Now, sometimes we assume that because he was God's son, all this decision making was easy for him. But what happens next reveals that this wasn't the case at all. What happens next, in all three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) is Jesus' wilderness temptation experience, In it we see that we Jesus come to clarity about who he is and why he has come.

If you do any financial transactions on your computer, usually on the right hand side near the bottom of the screen there's a box that says "PROCEED." It's the last box you have to check before the transaction goes through. But just before that box, usually somewhere over to the left there is another one you have to check first. This one says, "I am not a robot." (I know it's an important security feature, but who comes up with this stuff?) You know, with the technology available to us today, I'm surprised there isn't a way to get a robot to check that box and so circumvent the system.

But here's my point. Jesus was not a robot. He was not God's robot. He was not a puppet. He was a real person just like you and me and he lived with people just like you and me. What makes Jesus' example so powerful...here centuries later...is that he saw his baptism as a place of love, a place he could always go back to throughout his life, a place where he experienced unconditional love, this love that is before anything and after everything. We can follow his life and see that this is exactly what he did in every situation, every relationship, every moment...from his baptismal moment forward he was always coming at life from love. He could have come at life from fear, from anger, from shame or guilt or any number of places. But no, he chose to come from love.

Yesterday morning I was walking through Anastasia State Park on the island. We live in the neighborhood just behind it. At the moment I was working on this particular part of the sermon, this idea of coming from love, when I heard music. Then it was loud music. Then blaring music. And here comes this guy riding his E-bike--a beautiful bike, by the way--toward me. As he rode past me we acknowledged each other but with only a glance. Up until then I had been in my own little world working on my sermon. He came along with his boisterous music and bumped me out of it...something

I didn't appreciate. After all, I don't like such loud music...I'm not a fan of that particular kind of music...and, I decided, I didn't like his bike either. Anyway, he passed by me and we each went our own way.

At this point I was heading toward the back gate to go home. I started up a little conversation with God and asked, "God, does everybody have to listen to this guy's blaring music just because he wants to?" Then, I feel like God says back to me, "No. No. Not at all...but you do." Hmm. So I think for a while. as I'm getting closer to the gate and I ask the quintessential human question, "Why me, Lord?" Then silence. I don't hear anything at all. No reply from God. But wait...now...I hear...music. I hear THAT music! Sure enough, I look over my shoulder and here comes the bike guy. THEN God pipes up, "I've decided to give you a second chance."

Now what happens next falls into the category of "You can't make this stuff up!" Still walking, I'm a few feet from the gate which is locked and requires a code. Fortunately, I've got the code. He stops, gets off his bike and waits. We look briefly at each other. I smile and say, "Good morning," and reach to unlock the gate...meanwhile I'm still talking to God, saying, "Ok, God, so now I'm supposed to be kind to this guy I don't even like?" So, I hold the gate open and motion for him to pass through. At that moment he looks me right in the eye, gives me this great big smile and says very sincerely, "Thanks very much!" And off he goes.

Jesus came from love into every situation. When Jesus spoke with the woman at the well, someone whom no one else wanted anything to do with, he was...coming from love. When Jesus healed the ten lepers who were outcast from their community, he was...coming from love. When he healed blind Bartimaeus, he was...coming from love. When a woman named Mary crashed a party to which Jesus had been invited by some of the Jewish leaders and she poured expensive perfume on his feet for which even his own disciples criticized him, he was...coming from love. When he preached the sermon on the mount to some 5000 strangers...people who were looking for love, he was...coming from love. When he turned the tables in the temple, he was...coming from love. And even in his death, he was...coming from love. Jesus came from love into every situation.

When the bike guy was gone, I went through the gate myself and stopped for a moment. I looked up and said, "Really, God. What was that all about?" At first, silence....and then I heard, "Well Jer, since I know you're preaching tomorrow...about being "so blessed"...and about being "blessed so"...and about coming at life from love no matter what, I decided I needed to make sure that...you got...your point.

Amen.