

1 Epiphany
Baptism of Our Lord Sunday
JANUARY 12, 2025

Sermon by Rev. Jerry LiaBraaten

CROSSING RAINBOWS

THREE QUESTIONS

I'd like to begin by asking three questions. The first two are easy. The third will take a little more thought. Question #1: Where were you baptized (if you were baptized)? Question #2: Where is one of the most beautiful--and maybe moving--places you've visited in nature? Question #3: Whether in person or online, why have you come to this worship service today?

BEAUTIFUL PLACES IN NATURE & IN THE BIBLE

One of those beautiful places in nature for me is the Muir Woods National Monuments forest just a few miles north of San Francisco where the 'national monuments' are the giant redwood trees. I invite you to join me in an imaginary walk through that forest right now. We'll start off together but then, whenever you feel like it, peel off from the group, wander around a bit on your own, and then find one of those amazing trees to sit under. If you sit very, very still and are perfectly quiet, the forest will probably reveal all sorts of creatures, big and small, that once they feel safe, will come out of the hiding places. Shortly, you may be surprised to find that the place where you are is teeming with life of all kinds.

I like to think of the Bible in this way, as if it's a forest--full of tree after tree after tree. Chock full of life. You and I can sit down under any one of those trees and if we sit very still and very quietly we will be treated to a wealth of wisdom. Today's gospel reading is one of those places. But even though it's little more than a paragraph, there's far more here than we can appreciate in our short time together. So, I'd like to focus on one small 'glen'--just the last twelve words--where we hear the voice of God saying to Jesus, "You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

Before we get to them let's consider their context. People from all over the region are coming to be baptized by John the Baptist. Why were they coming? Some were probably just curious. Who was this mystical man whom they've heard so much about? Some were probably coming because they'd made the decision to be baptized. The rest were somewhere in between.

What did they bring with them? Probably not much. Maybe just some lunch. But then again, maybe a lot! The text tells us they brought their expectations and their questions---"questioning in their hearts" so we know they were serious ones! So maybe they were also bringing their struggles, their trials and triumphs, their sadness, their stress, their joy, their pain. In other words...they were bringing everything...their whole lives.

And, of course, God came, too.

GOD CAME, TOO

What about God? What were God's expectations? Did God have any questions? What did God bring that day? Well, God brought these 12 wonderful words..."You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." God could have said anything on this very special occasion? He said these twelve. Why?

Look at what God said with them. God named Jesus “the beloved.” But he didn’t just name him (with an honorary name!). God also claimed him saying, “You are my son...” But God didn’t just name him and claim him, God told Jesus God loved him. But God didn’t just name and claim and tell Jesus about loving him. God affirmed him--unconditionally--with the final words, “...with whom I am well pleased.”

Why these words in particular when God could have said anything in the world? God wanted to prepare Jesus in the best way possible for what he lay ahead of him once he rose up out of those waters. Give him something he could remember and take with him no matter what the situation, where he was or who he was with in the days and years ahead.

DERRICK HENRY

There’s a marvelous story about the NFL running back Derrick Henry (born and raised in Jacksonville!) and his mother. In 2018, while playing for the Tennessee Titans in a game against the Jaguars he gained 238 yards rushing and made 4 touchdowns! When asked how he accounted for his stellar performance he credited his mother (a single mom working multiple jobs and making many sacrifices so Derrick could keep playing football). He said, “I do it for her. Everything I do is for her. She’s the one who’s been there for me my whole life. She is everything.”

Derrick sounds like someone whose mother, in effect, said the same words as God’s baptismal words to Jesus, “You are my son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.” He *knew* those words, felt the power of them in his own life and he lived them...lived them out...playing football!

ARCHETYPES & AN ARCHETYPAL EXPERIENCE

Why is this story in the Bible? Could be many reasons. Most biblical scholars and theologians believe it is there in order to certify Jesus as “pedigreed,” that he is, in fact, the true Son of God and all that. As far as I’m concerned that’s all well and good. But I believe there is an even more important reason why it’s in there: Because Jesus is the archetype (prototype) of the kind of relationship God wants to have with everyone. And more, Jesus’ baptism (including these 12 words) are an *archetypal experience*. It acknowledges what we all long for our entire lives...to be named...claimed...loved...and affirmed. No matter who we are, what we’re doing, where we are, where we’ve been or where we’re going--we all yearn for these things. Nothing is more important to us. Nothing! Indeed, we spend our entire lives--and all we have--seeking after them!

CIGNA & THE LONELINESS INDEX

You may know of The Cigna Group...a Fortune 500 company specializing in healthcare and insurance in the US and abroad. Each year they produce the results of a survey called the Cigna Loneliness Index which monitors loneliness trends. According to their 2023 report 58% of Americans reported feeling occasional loneliness (down from 61% during the height of the Covid pandemic). Even more surprising however...the number was 71% for Millenials (age 25-40) and a whopping 79% among Gen Zer’s (age 18-14).

Now you may say, “Well, that’s not all that surprising. We all feel lonely once in a while.” And I would say, “Thank you for making my next point.” Because you’re certainly right, we all experience loneliness at least now and then...*and that is precisely why God’s words to Jesus are equally important for you and me to take to heart*. It’s why we need to know we are named, claimed, loved and affirmed! Would it have done Jesus any good if God felt this way about him but never told him?! The same is true for us. But further, do those words do us any good, even if they’re true, if we don’t believe them?!

EVA CASSIDY & RAINBOWS

One of my favorite singers is the late Eva Cassidy. She sang across various genres of music in her all too brief lifetime. One of my favorite songs is her rendition of *Somewhere over the Rainbow*. When she gets to the last refrain of the song the music modulates up a step and when you hear what she does with it...you know. *You know she's crossed over. She's singing from the other side of the rainbow. She got it. And she wants us to know it.* It's incredible. Just like Derrick got his mother's love. And just like Jesus got God's love. How do we know Jesus got it? Just look at his life.

When we look at Jesus' baptism through these twelve simple words, we realize that our baptism isn't so much about our believing in God, as about realizing--and believing--that God believes in us.

SHOW & TELL

Finally, if you happen to be one who writes fiction (novels and such) you know one of the cardinal rules of good writing is this: "Don't tell me. Show me!"

It means...write in such a way that the reader doesn't feel like you're simply describing an experience. Write in such a way that draws the reader in so the reader experiences each moment right along with the characters in the story...largely through engaging his/her five senses, their emotion and their imagination. Don't just tell me. Show me...and you will make it come alive in me.

I find this helpful advice when it comes to sharing God's love with the world. You can't just walk up to a complete stranger and say, "Hey man, I love you...or.."You know, God loves you." We'll creep them out! No, we save these special words for an intimate circle of those closest to us...the ones we call our "loved ones." But you and I can *show* our love (through acts of kindness or courage, for instance)--even to complete strangers--and they won't just accept it. They will thank us for it! We've all had the experience where we've done something kind or maybe even courageous for someone and they *got* it. We've also had experiences where a stranger *showed* us love. It may even, in some small way, have changed our lives--at least in that moment...and we got it! You see, we all recognize love.

CONCLUSION: A THREEFOLD INVITATION

These words and this archetypal story of Jesus' (and our) baptism invite us to do three things. First, they invite us to let our love grow. Let it grow through believing that these words of love weren't just meant for Jesus. They are meant for each of us...and for everyone else! Second, they invite us to let our love show, Don't just tell. Don't just talk about it or save it for our precious few. Let your love show. Show it everywhere...to everyone from your closest loved ones to complete strangers. And third, they invite us to let our love go. Let it go and see where it takes us.

I guarantee you one thing: You'll be crossing some rainbows.