

Sermon: Baptism of the Lord
John 1:19-34

by David Hockett
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You may remember this scene from the movie, *O Brother Where Art Thou*. The three main characters, who happen to be escaped convicts, come across the surreal sight of a group of people dressed in white, singing as they move mysteriously through the woods towards a river. The three friends, who are on the run trying to leave their old life behind, follow the line of people only to find themselves almost accidentally caught up in a line of people standing on the shore of the river waiting to be baptized. Delmar rushes into the water and pushes past the line eager to be baptized. As he emerges from the water Delmar shouts with joy that all his sins have been washed away. "Even the sin of knocking off that Piggly Wiggly,". His surprised friends turn to him and say, "But you said you were innocent of that." "I lied," he confessed, "and the preacher says, that sin has been washed away too!"

In her book *Still*, novelist and theologian Lauren Winner tells the story of her very personal struggles with what some have termed, "the dark night of the soul," a period of intense spiritual dryness, marked by doubt, and in which God seems absent. In sharing her story, Winner talks about the power of the story of Jesus' baptism. "There is John at the river Jordan, and there are all those unwashed people who have come to be baptized, and in the line is Jesus, who is without sin, who shouldn't be in that line with all of those sinning people. But there he is, Jesus, in the line with the guy you know who's cheated on his wife, with the woman who stole from her employer, with that one neighbor who's just not very nice, with that kid who bullies the smaller kids in class, with that shady business man, and Jesus in line with all those unwashed sinners. One by one, each of them appears at the head of John's line. And then Jesus appears. And John says, 'I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?' and Jesus insists."

As we saw last week, Epiphany is in part about our learning who Jesus really is, and who we are in light of who he is. Now John's gospel leaves out the details of Jesus' baptism, but there is no lack of clarity in John the baptizer's mind who Jesus is and how his identity defines our own. John answered, "I only baptize using water. A person you don't recognize has taken his stand in your midst. He comes after me, but he is not in second place to me. I'm not even worthy to hold his coat for him."... John was baptizing at the time. The very next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and yelled out, "Here he is, God's Passover Lamb! He forgives the sins of the world! This is the man I've been talking about, 'the One who comes after me but is really ahead of me.'...My task has been to get Israel ready to recognize him as the God-Revealer. That is why I came here baptizing with water, giving you a good bath and scrubbing sins from your life so you can get a fresh start with God." (John 1:26-33)

And so, Winner goes on to say, “The official reason this is an Epiphany story is that after Jesus is baptized, a dove alights on him, and a voice comes from heaven declaring, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’ The voice is taken to be the answer to Epiphany’s question: this is who Jesus is – he is God’s well-beloved and pleasing Son. But might it also be, she observes, that we learn something of who this Jesus is not only by the heavenly voice declaring him to be the Son of God.

But might it also be that we learn something of who this Jesus is simply by his standing there in line, with us, by the river. It turns out he really is Emmanuel, God-with-us. He is there with us even in the baptismal line. Jesus is the one who stands with our humanity in this line, a line that is all about our sinning and our shame.” (Winner, 35-36) He is with us all the way to the depths, where our sin is drowned once and for all, so that we can then rise up and walk unburdened and unchained and free to love as he loved, free to be human in the way he was human, and free to be fully alive to God. Jesus is in that line with us.

Now I don’t know about you, but as one who is quite fully aware of just how far short I often come to being who God has created and called me to be, that is good news that we have a Savior, the Son of God, who has stood in that line with us, who knows our sin and our brokenness, and whose presence in those waters means that in his name we have been washed clean and are being made new and whole.

Even though our sin separated us from God, in and through the waters of baptism our sin is forgiven, we are given a new name, a new identity, and the possibility for a new future. Because Jesus has stood in that line, the waters of baptism become the place of our adoption where God claims us as God’s own beloved sons and daughters, and we are given the possibility to begin again and to live a life that really matters.

John was right. Jesus did not need to be baptized. But in standing in line with us, in his willingness to get down in the water, so to speak, to get his feet wet and stand knee deep in the Jordan alongside the rest of us sinners, Jesus’ baptism is a sign of his total, complete linkage with us and with the will of God. Because Jesus was willing to get in the water with us, his baptism is a powerful reminder to us that God wants to draw near to us, to know our humanity, to associate fully with us and our condition in order that whatever separates us from God might be overcome. So that nothing we’ve done or left undone can keep us from God’s love.

Baptism is God’s gift to us, an act of grace; it is God’s act in the Church on our behalf - God doing for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. It is the way in which we are washed clean and the place where God grants us entrance into a new and abundant life. It is as though we take off our old selves and put on Christ. And it is also, as Jesus demonstrates by standing in line with

us, it is also an act of obedience to the Father, a means by which God lays claim upon our life even as we offer our life in service to God and God's kingdom.

In baptism, we are not only given a new identity and a new name, we change our citizenship, leaving behind all the false gods and idols that demand our attention and we proclaim that only "Jesus is Lord."

What an amazing gift. Because Jesus stood in that line and has troubled those waters God claims us. In spite of our sin and our brokenness God pours out water to wash us clean, to make us new and whole, and in so doing says, "I know what you've done, and I love you still. You are my son, my daughter, and with you I am well-pleased." All who have baptized are now intimately linked with the life of Jesus and our true identity and calling are found in him. This is what John the Baptist was trying to get folks to see. We do not create a life or a future for ourselves because in baptism our lives and our futures are bound up with his. No longer are our lives defined primarily by the stories of nation, or class, or race, or family. Rather, because we are baptized we have been given a new identity and a new story for our lives – Jesus' story becomes our story. We, like John, have a role to play, but Jesus is the central character. Now of course we can reject that story and refuse to live out of our baptismal identity but when we do we are living a lie and denying who we truly are. Or, every day, when we wake up and put out feet on the floor we can remember who we are – that we have a Savior who stood in line with us, and so we are the beloved sons and daughters of God. No matter what anyone else says about who we are or who we should be, no matter what other stories the world tries to give us to live by, we are Jesus' brothers and sisters and through baptism we have become a part of the story that God is writing. Baptism is an act of grace, because it is a great gift to have our lives caught up in something larger than ourselves – for we become most fully alive when at once we lose our life and find our life in Christ. And so, baptism is a gift, a gift that enables us to let go of our lives long enough that we might realize that we now share Jesus' life, his story is our story, his life is ours, his death is ours, his resurrection ours, his ministry is ours, we are his family, and he stands in line with us yesterday, and today, and tomorrow so that in this life, in all its trials and joys, in all its successes and failures we are never alone. God is with us. Let us pray.