

**A SERMON FOR DAYSPRING
JANUARY 13, 2008**

*PRAYER: WE HAVE LIFTED OUR VOICES TO YOU,
NOW WE OPEN OUR HEARTS TO YOU. WE REST IN YOU.
LORD, HEAR OUR PRAYER. AMEN.*

COME ON IN, THE WATER'S FINE

Would YOU have wanted to be baptized by John? This wild evangelist with an even wilder message, wearing camel hair and leather; a beard smeared with insects and honey? Preaching loving, contemplative inviting words of like “unquenchable fire, pitchforks, clearing out the threshing floor...” Here he is standing knee deep in the river saying, “Trust me... I'll hold you tight?” Would YOU have wanted your life to be held in the hands of John the Baptizer?

But here Jesus comes, parting the crowd, asking to be baptized by John. The very One John had been pointing to is standing right in front of him.

“You want ME to baptize YOU?”

“Yes.”

“I am not worthy.”

“Baptize me, John.”

“I can't even tie your shoes.”

“But I should be baptized by you, and here you are coming to me?”

“Let it be, John; let it be so now.”

THEN JOHN CONSENTED to Jesus. And Jesus consented to John. Echoes of “Thy will be done” were already being heard.

It was this preview of coming attractions that turned the river Jordan into a sanctuary of sorts, don't you think? Chronological time melted into sacred time, a sacred space: Time slowed down... something holy was taking place in the middle of that ordinary river water; in the speaking and hearing of words; in the timing of it all.

It was a picture of Jesus' life to come... Jesus was identifying with humanity in that very moment. It was the marriage of his humanity and his divinity... a one-act play, if you will (I would say sacred nutshell, but that word has already been taken). His descent into the waters of the Jordan that pointed toward his descent into suffering and the passions of his future death; his rising from beneath the waters – the picture of his resurrection from the grave; and the dove... the dove coming down from heaven... a symbol of the Holy Spirit that would be given to all later at Pentecost.

As he later would hand himself over to his accusers, here Jesus was this day, the divine handing himself over to the human for baptism, for blessing, for identifying himself as the Son of God – a second epiphany. Jesus was on his way to the cross that very day; the end was in this beginning.

We don't have many stories of Jesus before this auspicious beginning of his ministry. We are told the story of Mary and Joseph and the angel's announcement. We are told of his birth and his appearance to the Wise Men. We are told of his experience in the temple as a boy. He has been raised by his parents, reared in his

village as a precocious child, growing to be a curious tween, and I suppose he was in the youth group; next a 20-something, and then here he is barely a 30-something.

Jesus had lived with his family being taught the rituals, traditions and forms of family and religion. His spiritual development and identity took place in those early years. And like so many others who have made a difference in history, it wasn't until the second half of life that the convergence of formation and identity take place. It's in the second half of life when we can take the forms, the containers, as Richard Rohr calls it, from the first half of life and free ourselves to be as we were created to be. So, when that first big toe dipped into the waters of the river Jordan that day, Jesus was intentionally marking the movement over the threshold from the first part of his life into the second. From life as he had always known it, to life that would lead to his death. He waded into the waters of baptism, where he knew that his life would never be the same once he made that NEXT step, dripping wet, onto the other side.

Just as the act of baptism itself was finished, then the blessing of who he was, was both seen and heard. The Holy Spirit appeared to the One who had surrendered himself to the waters of transformation. Into the waters of love he had willingly been submerged and then the invisible spirit was made visible.

The Beloved spoke to the Beloved. The Beloved whom we seek, whom we desire, whom we look for our entire lives, spoke to Jesus that day. The Lord's voice spoke, "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

You are Mine; you are My Son.

The Word was there... the Voice was there.

Listen again to the psalmist:

The voice of the Lord is majestic...

The voice of the Lord thunders over the mighty waters...

The voice of the Lord is powerful...

The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon...

The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare...

And it was that very voice wasn't it, which spoke when Jesus was baptized?

Was it loud? I don't know.

Did it twist and uproot trees? I don't know.

Was it powerful? You bet.

Have you ever heard a whisper so powerful it sounded like thunder?

Have you ever been whispered a word of love so intimate that your very life was changed in an instant? A word so powerful that you wanted both to cover your ears and to hear it again and again and again. The exchange of love, the giving and surrendering to another is both terrible and beautiful... wanted, not wanted; needed, so needed... it is wanting to be known and wanting to hide.

Isn't it this beloved-ness that transforms us? Isn't it knowing that we are the beloved that calls us to put ourselves into the hands of the Divine Presence who simply cannot go away from us; the Love that will not let us go. It is this surrender to the Beloved that our souls are created for; it is this surrender and consent that are the waters of baptism leaning us into Spoken Love so that we may say with Christ, "Let it be so."

As human beings created with a place to know God, we do aspire to something transcendent because we are created with souls, created to know more than the visible and material... to know sacred moments, to enter into sacred time. It is why we resonate and lean forward when we hear that we can open ourselves to the Divine. I think that somehow we intuitively know to do this, but our daily struggles inevitably keep us from focusing; keep us busy and looking outward; keep us out of balance and off-center.

Anna Henderson shared this week a wonderful analogy about being out of balance in our lives. Know what the washing machine sounds like when the clothes are not balanced? Sounds like it's going to walk right out of the laundry room, busting through the walls? It looks like something out of a Transformers movie... an ordinary machine coming to life as a monster. It evokes a kind of panic, doesn't it? We go running to get to it and open the lid... we're breathless once it's over. It is so loud and demanding... we feel as jarred as if we ourselves have been inside it, don't we?

This intuitive bent of ours for spiritual transformation, to know and be known, seeks and searches, but so many parts of our lives get in the way and keep us unbalanced and off-center. Loud, demanding, we are panicked about so many things... our intellect, our anxieties, our need for control, the demands of others, our need to please others, our addictions to all kinds of things including people and relationships... we keep trying to locate the core of ourselves, to get back to center... keep trying to find God but instead we find ourselves frustrated because we try and try and try to figure it all out.

In this picture of baptism we see the picture of Christ submitting his body, a gesture of humility and surrender, not an intellectual conversation. Cynthia Bourgeault says that... "Trying to find this kind of faith with the intellect is like trying to play the violin with the saw... it's simply the wrong tool for the job." It is with our bodies and our souls that we learn to lean into the embrace of the Divine, letting ourselves be immersed into the heart of God. (Bourgeault)

"Fall fearless into love," she says. We don't argue into love; we don't whine into love; we don't demand, discuss, debate into love. We follow, we fall... into the Love that we are made for, the Love that, as we lean back into it, carries us into a depth of living and meaning that we could never know had we not surrendered, yielded and handed ourselves over to the Love of Christ.

When Harrison was about 5 yrs old, he asked me one day, "What makes words real?"

Well. You philosophers out there, what do you say? What makes them alive?

Is it the practice of them? Is it the speaking of them, the doing of them?

Follow me... baptize me... lose yourself for my sake... walk in newness of life. Be not conformed to this world but be transformed... love one another... forgive one another... I am yours and you are mine... you are my beloved.

These aren't just words to think about. These are words to live, to make real in our world, in our lives... words to surrender to. This is the path of transformation.

I must point out another part following today's story, a part that I believe is connected. Jesus, full of the Spirit, went immediately, or he was led immediately by the Spirit, after his baptism and blessing, to the wilderness to be tempted - another place of his formation as the Son of God, as living as the beloved. It wasn't just the sacred waters of baptism, where the Divine Presence appeared; it was also in the sacred desert wilderness of temptation and purification. Jesus was able to say to the tempter, "I am the Son of God."

He knew who he was. He had been blessed as God's beloved.

He was ordained by the Holy Spirit.

He heard the voice of God...he saw the spirit of the One from whom he came.

His Father's voice was unmistakable; he was his Father's Son.

It was from this experience of blessing and formation that he was led by the Spirit into a period of solitude where there were questions and struggles... temptations. He was as the Bread of Life being "taken, blessed, broken, and then given."(Henri Nouwen)

For just as he had emerged from the waters of baptism, he emerged from the desert - both places sacred and formative. It was then he began going about doing good, pointing the way to the Eternal.

Either we will go to the wilderness or the wilderness will come to us.
If we live long enough, we will have difficult times in our lives.
We will wonder if God has left us... "Is God absent from my life?"
We will be tempted to substitute idols for the True God: "I can do it myself."
We will wonder what has happened to us: "Am I all alone?"
Most of all we will wonder who we are.

I'm reminded of my years as a hospice chaplain. It was this question of identity that seemed to be most evident as a person lives the last days of life. All of the roles that are played out in life are eventually taken away: boss, employee, athlete, banker, lawyer, minister, professor, student, musician, cook, driver, even the ways we are feminine or masculine; all the things that we say when someone asks us who we are. The question of "Who am I?" eventually becomes primary. After everything is taken away, what is left? At the end, we are left with just us and God.

With nothing else to do, nothing to keep us busy, with nowhere to go.

With this period of life that is changing from earthly to sacred.

With the outer body wasting away, it is the inner life that can be renewed day by day.

Spirits grow larger and more in tune with the Divine.

We finally hear that we are beloved for who we are, not for what we accomplish. It becomes an authenticity that is pure because when one finally surrenders the final thing we ever can... our life as we know it... then we really do fall into The Beloved.

Holy water of change...

Intimate words of love...

I wonder,

What keeps us from being baptized?

Julie Burleson told me a story... a really beautiful story about a dove. Years ago as she was standing outside her house (before Waco), a dove flew down and lighted on her shoulder. It wouldn't leave. She walked around, it stayed there. After a period of time, she decided to go into the house to see if it stayed with her, and it did. Well, she kept it. I'm sure Burt said, "Sure, honey... whatever you want." This beautiful dove became their pet. And they named her Pneuma, the word for Spirit. Pneuma stayed outside her cage most of the time, sitting on a certain shelf or on someone's shoulder, quietly present, but present. Pneuma was with them; she was theirs, and they were hers. This wild bird became personal. This beautiful creature of the sky, entered into their home and their hearts.

It goes without saying... we're God's beloved. We know the story. But as I've said before, I think the things that go without saying are often the things that most often need to be said, so...

I've been told that in order to remember something we have to hear it or say it seven times. Can you picture Pneuma – that wild Spirit sitting on your shoulder whispering to you:

1. You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.
2. You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.
3. You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.
4. You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.
5. You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.
6. You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.
7. You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.

AMEN.

Regina Easley-Young