

At baptism, our identity as the beloved is affirmed by God. With that identity we can take comfort, we can take strength, and we can take action.

A few years ago, the session of our church voted to require a class Baptism to those who wished to have their child baptized in our church. So through out the year, the baptism class is offered. It outlines the meaning of baptism and the significance baptism has in the life of the parent, the child, and the church. As a shameless plug, these classes are open to anyone, in case you would like to refresh your own baptismal beliefs.

One of the most interesting moments of the class is when attendees share their understanding and experience of baptism. With the diversity of theological and faith backgrounds that makes up our membership, we hear beautiful stories that reflect the broad umbrella that is makes up the Christian family. We have been fortunate to have people share things like what it was like to remember their baptism as a youth or adult or how important their godparents were in their faith journey or how they shared the sacrament with a sibling or parent. While there are many different perspectives that come to the class, we have found that there are generally the same few questions can be expected. *One of the most common questions is "What is the difference between a baptism and a christening?"* While searching for the right answer. I pursued the denominations website.

The PCUSA website has a thorough answer for this very question that is taken from Mark Searle's book *Christening: the Making of Christians*. Searle says that Christening "comes from an old English word meaning 'to dedicate to Christ.'" The primary meaning of the word is baptism. The secondary meaning is naming. The article then begins a lengthy discourse on the pitfalls of a christening. It says a christening goes amiss when it becomes all about the naming and less about "the themes of new birth in Christ, engrafting into the covenant, washing away of sin and death and welcoming in new life." It concludes with this dire warning, that Christening is a "problematic term. For that reason, Presbyterians are better off avoiding the word unless they are prepared to reinterpret it for the listener." *Suffice it to say, we do not use this in our class to answer the common question.*

I don't quote this article for many obvious reasons. But, one of the reasons might be less obvious. Its because it isn't exactly right. This article, and I will say it, is wrong because *baptism is all about naming*. Of course, what Searle was wary of is when a christening or a similar act focuses on the child and the name, excluding God and Christ's role, when it becomes a secular event focused on the individual.

It is important to state that baptism is all about naming. Baptism is about the name and identity we receive from God. *That name is the same one we share with Jesus, we are the*



beloved. That is a name we all hear spoken to us at our baptism by God. It is an identity that is true and permanent. We are what God says we are. As the beloved children of God, we have all that we need to do the work we are called to do. In baptism, our identity as the Beloved is affirmed by God. In this identity we experience God seeking us, our role in God's creation, and the strength to be the Beloved. We are the Beloved and it is everything.

It is a bold claim to say that our baptisms are like the baptism of Jesus Christ, but they are.

It is bold to say the same words God spoke to Jesus that day are the same words God says to us, but they are.

We can claim this because it was the ministry of Jesus and as it is affirmed in scripture. All aspects of Jesus's life were part of the gift to us. The gift is that we share in Jesus's blessing and Jesus shares in our suffering. So when God affirms Jesus's identity at baptism we too receive that affirmation of identity.

Mark's account of Jesus' baptism is unique because his description implies that the vision of God, Jesus, and the Spirit, all present at once, was only experienced by Jesus. Before we hear God's word, Jesus sees a vision as he emerges from the water. *Jesus sees the sky ripped open*. God is not bound by space or time. Nothing would prevent God from being part of this event. But God chose a dramatic entrance of altering the universe to be present. God is willing to tear apart the universe, that which he created and called good. God's action is surprising but it is exciting. God could have opened the heavens but he ripped them.

The thing about rips is you know when one has occurred. Even when rips are sewn up you can see where it once was. In God's action the barrier between God's kingdom and the heavens and our sinful world is brought down. The division between divine and earthly is no longer black and white. It is a continuation of what the manifestation of Jesus does for us. God is in the world and the divide between God and humans is no longer the same. Through this torn divider God has a message to give to say.

That is when Jesus hears those comforting words of "You are my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The term son of God is used in the Bible for other people besides Jesus. It was often used to refer to the Kings of Israel and sometimes the people of Israel. To distinguish Jesus from the other sons Mark adds the Beloved. *The Beloved is not only an adjective describing divine love of Jesus from God. The Beloved is a divine title given to the Messiah*. Beloved can be translated as my chosen. "My chosen" is used in various places in the Old Testament when

scripture mentions the promise of the coming of the Messiah, the messianic promise. Beloved also was a term used by some Jewish writers to a reference or alternative name for the Messiah. Prince of Peace, Lord of Lord, the Beloved.

With these names, Mark makes it clear that *this son of God* is *the Son of God*. God speaks the words to Jesus for him to hear. There were others at the Jordan River being washed bpatized by John the Baptist. This event was not to show them who Jesus was. It was for Jesus to hear, see, and know himself. It was a message and identity shared among the persons of the Trinity. Theologian Manford Geroge Gutzke described it as "a secret which no human being can fathom."

Mainline protestants have generally been known to emphasize the symbolism of baptism. That is to say there may be a separation between what happens at baptism and the meaning of baptism. This tends to remove the mystery that surrounds a sacrament. We don't know what

occurs when we administer sacraments so it is not out of the realm of possibility that when we baptize people today that God rips open the sky to seek us out. That God speaks to us at our baptism and tell us that we are the Beloved, with you I am well pleased. And perhaps that is too much mystery, drama, and divine interaction for some which I understand. But I will say that as God came to and spoke to Jesus at the moment of his baptism, God does the same for all of us. What God says to us is only to us, it is like that great secret between Creator and creation. Then with our life in Christ we seek to know it.

As Jesus has his messianic identity confirmed at baptism. That title comes to us as well. We do not become the Messiah but we are part of the Beloveds work. We often use the expression we are engrafted in to the body of Christ, which can look like being part of the work and promise of the Messiah, Christ's ministry on earth. The Messiah was to bring joy to the people, to rescue them, and give them salvation. We must continue that. Christ entrusted us with the care of the people, we must carry on the work of the Messiah in our own way.

While we all share the name the Beloved. We share the responsibility of that title with our service in God's name and following Christ. Yet, the way we live this out is as unique as what God says to us. Our life and our response has been described to be as unique as our fingerprints. The secret that was shared between all persons of the Trinity that can not be comprehended by us. When God speaks to us we may only understand parts of it but as we live and grow in Christ we will gain insight and clarity on what God said to us at our Baptisms. At this point the idea of what is assumed in our baptismal name may seem like too much. And it would be except for the strength that we can find in our identity and the faith we can



ground it in.

In Mark, once Jesus is baptized his ministry begins. Jesus is ready to go in to the world and begin to turn it all upside down. His first event is not arguing scripture with crabby Pharisees. It was to go in to the wilderness and face Satan's temptations. Jesus went out with his identity freshly affirmed by the Father. And it was more than enough to remain strong, refuse temptation and move on to his work.

We are tempted in many ways every day. They appear more simply than what Jesus faced. We are tempted to be unkind when it is easier than being loving. We are tempted to place our faith and trust in values and ideas that are not our God. We are tempted to value things of this world over the blessings and precious gifts of God. Yet we can resist like these temptations but come to believe we are the Beloved. We are strengthened by this. We can find strength in those around us who are the Beloved too.

When we grow and believe and trust we are the beloved of God we affirm what God affirmed. We can find the strength and will to live as Christ wanted us to live and as God wants to share in the work of the salvation of this world.

Jesus made sure that what he received we would receive. So those words spoken to him by God are our words our identity, our title, and our life. You are my children, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Rev. James Laurence says "that there is no simpler or clearer definition

of the gospel than that....That in Jesus, we are God's children, the beloved. With whom God is well pleased. It is no wonder that baptism is of such comfort. It is our reminder of this great truth, the great truth of our lives. That we are God's beloved children."

This good news changes how we live each and every day. We remember our baptism when we see them occur here but remember your baptism each day because you are renewed every day by it.

You have been named by God himself to come to believe in that gift. Listen for what God said to you at your baptism. Live as one who shares in work begun by Christ. Ground yourself in that identity that is true because God says that is who you are.

A voice from heaven says to you this day and all your days You are my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." That is the Good News of Jesus Christ. Amen.