

BELOVED SERVANT

Isaiah 42:1-9

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Matthew 3:13-17

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TEXT: Matthew 3:17 “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”

PURPOSE: To invite us to be embraced by the ways that God tells us who we are, as they are revealed in our Baptism.

Isn't the baptism of a sweet child just the thing we need to lift our spirits on a dreary winter weekend? We come in here, dragged down by dirty snow and a week's worth of baptism by rain. But then there is a baby all done up in a splendid baptismal gown, and that's enough to brighten our spirits through whatever this season might dish out. Alyssa is being baptized on the Sunday when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. At the beginning of the season of Epiphany, the season which celebrates the light of the world coming into the world, Christ's Church is reminded that our Savior allowed himself to be fully immersed in life as we know it. As we begin to hear again the story of his journey toward Calvary, his Church once again hears God identifying him as “my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Spiritually speaking, all of us are baptized into Christ. All of us, in faith by grace, are drawn into his servant life, and become bearers of the light he still is for the world. But Alyssa gets a bonus, in that she is baptized on the day that we celebrate the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan at the very beginning of his earthly ministry. Actually, the connection between Alyssa and Jesus is even more intimate. In the live nativity that was presented on our church steps Christmas Eve, Alyssa played the part of baby Jesus. I must say, she played the part well. She hung in there for more than a half hour in that winter cold, surrounded by adoring shepherds and their sheep, including her sister Hailey, who, in her fuzzy costume, made a wonderful sheep. Even when the cattle were lowing, and the baby awoke, no crying she made. We couldn't have asked for better character development.

Alyssa's starring role in our nativity reminds us of what faith assures us takes place in baptism. In Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, he is taking our part, becoming fully human. In our baptism in the Church, we are taking his part, becoming God's beloved.

Take note that the Bible is somewhat wary with regard to Jesus' baptism. John offered a baptism of repentance, but Jesus, being without sin, had nothing to repent. John even objected to baptizing Jesus, but Jesus pressed him on the grounds of

fulfilling all righteousness. In submitting to baptism, Jesus entered into full solidarity with us, who need to be freed from sin's power and washed clean on our way into a new life. Jesus' act of submission created the conditions on earth that opened heaven, from which came the Spirit, descending like a dove, and the Voice, revealing who this dripping wet man really is. In this way God made clear that Jesus is the "servant" whom Isaiah anticipated, God's "chosen," in whom God's own soul delights, and who receives God's own spirit. (Isaiah 42:1) Which is to say, for Alyssa as for Jesus as for all of us, baptism is the sacrament which reveals who we really are. We are, by the sheer grace of God, God's beloved, God's child, God's servant.

We can spend a lot of time, and invest a lot of energy, in trying to discover who we are. It sounds like an adolescent project, but it is the basic project of human living. There are typical phases of our living, particularly in our youth, when the question of identity looms large. Except, don't tell a young person today that her emotional rollercoaster and her bouts with parental authority are all about forging identity. "Don't be silly!" she'll say. "This isn't about me trying to find myself; this is about Dad not paying for unlimited text messaging!"

Whether or not we worked at figuring out who we are when we were younger, the project surely gets obscured by the demands of living in the real world. Who among us has time or energy to invest in discovering our true identity? We know who we are: we are wives or husbands or life partners, identified by the one to whom we are united. Or we are single, divorced, or widowed, identified by a relationship we don't have. We are parents invested in our children's welfare, or we are children of aging parents, concerned about their welfare. We identify ourselves by our work: we are teachers, or nurses, or state workers. Or we identify ourselves as not working: we are retired, or unemployed. We identify ourselves by our health, or more, by our illness. Too many of us know who we are by what doctors are treating us and by what medications we take. Some of us are known, or know ourselves, by something from our past: we are an ex-convict, or a recovering addict, or divorced, or some secret we fear will change how people relate to us if they know "who we really are."

But that's about it. We settle into our "identities," whatever they may be. Supposedly, the search for our truest self is shelved beside the baby pictures, slipped inside the cover of our high school yearbook. Rather than being baptized into the new life in Christ, we are fully immersed in the business of daily living. Many of us come to church because we're looking for help for the business of living, or at least,

temporary relief from its demands. But the Church of Jesus Christ exists not to help us live our lives, but to welcome us into Christ's life, to find our truest self in him. Our encounter with the living Lord Jesus, which is built out from our baptism, is always about discovering who we really are, deep down under the roles and relationships and responsibilities of our lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and teacher who lived in the middle of the twentieth century. For a short time, he taught at Union Seminary, where both Tim and I received our Masters of Divinity degree— although both of us are much too young to have had Bonhoeffer as a teacher. But when Hitler and Nazism rose up in his native land, Bonhoeffer chose to return to encourage faith among the people there. Eventually, the Nazis convicted him of conspiracy and treason. He spent the last two years of his life in prisons in Berlin, and was hanged just a few weeks before the Allies liberated the city. During Bonhoeffer's imprisonment, he wrote many letters and poems, most of which have been collected and published. One of these poems, titled "Who Am I?" comes from this prison collection. Consider how his words might address our quest for our truest selves.

"Who am I? They often tell me/ I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,/ like a squire from his country-house. . . .

Who am I? They also tell me/ I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,/ like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, . . .
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other? . . .
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly weebegone weakling? . . .
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine."¹

¹Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, Letters and Papers from Prison; Collier Books, New York, 1972; p. 347.

Who is Jesus? He is a great teacher. He is a friend and a brother. He is Savior and Messiah. He is a rebel, confronting the hypocrisy of establishment religion. He is a threat to the fragile relationship between empire and occupied people, deserving of a traitor's death. But ultimately, recalling Isaiah, Jesus is God's servant, God's chosen, God's beloved. He is the one ordained of God to bring forth justice to the nations, whom God has given as a covenant to the people and a light to the nations. He is, according to the voice that sounded from heaven at his baptism, God's Beloved Son.

And who are we, who are, like Alyssa, baptized into this life that is Christ, most of us before we even are aware of the fuss that is made over us on our special day? Some of us are seekers, persons who aren't altogether sure of this whole enterprise of faith. Some of us are cradle Christians, who rarely have questioned the faith that's been in our lives much like the air we breathe. Some of us know ourselves as Dietrich inwardly knew himself: "restless and longing and sick, weary and empty at praying." Some of us aren't at all inclined to even ask the question. What difference does it make? What matters is what we do, how we live, not who we are.

But then there are those moments in our lives when the business of living is wrenched from its standard script, when our roles and responsibilities and routines are disrupted, when something unknown, perhaps the heavens, are opened to us, and we hear a voice we barely recognize calling us by name. Then, in those unfamiliar and unsettling moments, we realize that our own search for our own truest self has been ongoing, even if tucked away in the secret recesses of our souls. And if, as that adventure of self-discovery comes more clearly into our awareness, we receive grace sufficient to hear again the still small voice of God, we will hear what Dietrich heard inside that Nazi prison: "Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine."

At these blessed waters, we come to who we really are. From this moment of naming and claiming, our lives spread out in uncounted directions. From this day, when we are about as beloved as we get to be in this life, we will wander into many unknowns, and we are likely to wind up unloved or unlovely or both. But the waters will stay right here, assuring us that *who* we are ultimately is about *whose* we are. We are God's. God's beloved one. We are immersed in the life that is Christ. We have received the same Spirit that he received. We find our true self in living the life he gave us to live. No matter where we go, no matter who we think we have become, we can always come back to this place where our name was spoken in the hearing of heaven

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and earth, and where we may always know ourselves as God knows us: beloved child,
beloved servant.