

January 10, 2016
Isaiah 43:1-7
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

BELOVED

There is nothing like a parent telling you they love you and they are proud of you. I don't know how Jesus felt, but I know I feel pretty good when my dad tells me he is proud of me. A hundred other people could tell me they are proud of me. A thousand people could tell me that I'm doing a fantastic job. A million people could 'like' me on my facebook page. But it wouldn't matter as much as my dad liking me and telling me that he thinks I've done well.

Now I'm lucky to have a great dad. My parents are both very supportive. And they regularly affirm me. They tell me they love me and that they are pleased with how I have turned out. And that means a lot to me. Because now that I am a mom, I know it will mean a lot to my kids too. I want my kids to know that they are loved and that I'm proud they are my kids. And that that will always be true, no matter what. Because there is nothing like hearing that from your parent. "You are my son, my daughter, my beloved. With you I am well pleased."

I think that was important for Jesus too. I think it was important for him to hear his eternal father say that he was loved and that he was proud of him. I think it was really important for him at the beginning of his ministry. At his baptism, it was important for heaven to open, and the Spirit to descend like a dove. It was important for a voice to proclaim for all to hear: “You are my son, the beloved. With you, I am well pleased.” There’s nothing like hearing that from a parent. It was important for Jesus to hear. And it’s important for us to hear. That God loves us and God is proud of us. What happened in Jesus baptism, is what God means to have happen for us too. Three important things happen. First, heaven is opened. Second, it’s opened in the middle of our mess. And third, God’s love is poured out upon Jesus and upon us so it may be poured out into the world.

First, heaven is opened. In Luke’s gospel, it says that after Jesus was baptized and while he was praying, the heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. And a voice proclaimed Jesus was God’s beloved son, God’s pride and joy. Each of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, tell this story a little differently. They record

Jesus' baptism with most of the same points but with some slightly different details. Even the part about what happens in the heavens is different and interesting to note. In Mark, the heavens are torn apart as if God is busting God's way forcefully into the world, tearing apart the barrier between us. In Matthew, heaven is opened only to Jesus and we assume only Jesus sees it, perhaps emphasizing Jesus' unique and direct relationship to God. And in Luke's gospel, the gospel we heard today, heaven is opened. And that's all Luke says. There are no additional comments or modifiers. Heaven just opens. Maybe like a theater curtain opening. Or a gate opening. Or a front door opening. And all the heavenly conditioned atmosphere comes pouring out into our world. Luke simply says that the heaven opened.

Now I can remember another time in the Bible when the heavens were opened. In Genesis the heavens were opened and when the heavens were opened in the time of Noah, it rained for forty days and forty nights. And all life on earth was destroyed in the raging waters of the flood. The heavens were opened and heavenly anger poured out. God's disappointment poured out. God's rage at the selfishness and cruelty of

humanity poured out. When God opened up the heavens before, God really let us have it.

Maybe that's what John the Baptizer had in mind. He had in mind the judgment that God poured out from the heavens. It would come again, John said, but not just with water this time. There would be fire. The heavens would open, and the Holy Spirit and flames would descend and cleanse the world. That's what John expected. But at Jesus' baptism, the heavens open and look at that. Look at what comes down. Not floods of water. Not fire and flame. But a dove. A dove, like the one Noah sent out from the ark. After months and months of floating the flood waters, Noah wanted to know if any of this would be over any time soon. He sends out a dove and it brings back an olive branch. It was a sign. A message saying: It's OK. Everything's going to be OK. You are going to make it. All of the destruction is over with. At Jesus' baptism, it's a dove that descends from the heavens, not water or fire or death. It's a message, a sign of God's promise. It's going to be OK. Everything's going to be OK. The time for wrath is over and done with. We're going to make it home.

Heaven is opened at Jesus' baptism. But not to pour out God's wrath.

It's to pour out God's love. To pour out God's favor. Heaven is opened; it is opened to us. And nothing can separate us from God anymore.

There are no more barriers, or walls, or obstacles. All the things that kept God safely out there and us safely down here. All those things are gone. All those things between us are gone now.

At Jesus' baptism, Heaven is opened, and love comes pouring down.

Reconciliation, forgiveness, grace. You are my son, my daughter, my beloved and I'm proud of you. In our baptism, heaven is opened. And it is opened not when we are at our most perfect. But when we are knee-

deep in the middle of our mess. That's the second thing we learn at

Jesus' baptism. This great announcement of God's love comes at the muddy waters of the Jordan river. Not at the Temple in Jerusalem or at a holy shrine. But at the river surrounded by messy, broken people. People who had come to John the Baptizer because something wasn't right.

Something in their hearts. Something in their relationships with others or with God. People came to the River with their broken messy lives to wash away the old life and start again.

And Jesus was in that crowd. He too had come to be baptized by John. Some scholars say that that was a problem for the early church. A scandal. “Why would Jesus, the Son of God, need to be baptized? What sins would he need to have forgiven? Why on earth would he join in with sinful people in the messy, muddiness of the Jordan River? Because this is what God in Jesus Christ has come to do. To be part of our messiness. To be with us in our brokenness. Because we aren’t OK. Everything is not alright. We aren’t sure we are going to make it. Jesus comes to be with us there in our mess, right where we are. To say you are OK, you are going to make it. Everything will be all right. I’m with you. Emmanuel. God is with you. And at his baptism, at that moment, when Jesus stands with us, when Jesus takes our side, God proclaims from heaven, I love you, my son, and I’m proud of you. At the moment Jesus identifies with us and our mess, God proclaims, this is my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased. And heaven is opened. Not to curse, but to bless. And the third thing we witness in Jesus’ baptism is that God’s love is poured out upon Jesus so it may be poured out into the world. This baptism is at the very beginning of

Jesus' ministry. Jesus hasn't done anything yet, really. He hasn't performed any miracles or attracted any crowds of followers. Up until now, the first 30 years of his life have not been very noteworthy according to the gospels. But then Jesus is baptized. And the heavens open and the Spirit descends upon him. Jesus identifies with humanity and he hears the words, you are my son, my beloved, in you I am well pleased. Jesus hasn't even done anything yet. He has not cast out any demons or healed any lepers. He hasn't preached any sermons or fed any multitudes. He has not gone to the cross to give his life for his friends and enemies alike, and he has not risen from the grave. Jesus has not done any of that. And yet, God still says, you are my beloved son and with you I am well pleased.

There was nothing Jesus had to do. There was nothing Jesus had to accomplish. All that was necessary was for him to show up and stand in that River. To seek God and make himself available to God. He offers his life to God and receives an intense understanding of God's love and God's affirmation. There is nothing like having a parent tell you they love you and that they are proud of you. And that is exactly what Jesus

will need. He will need that affirmation and that love. He will need that intense experience. Because immediately after his baptism, he will be driven into the desert for forty days. He will face temptation in many forms. Then will come his grueling ministry. His hometown will reject him. His family will think he is crazy. The world will tell him over and over again that he is not loved and that he is not God's son but a son of the devil and he is not deserving of God's grace. And all Jesus will have to hold on to is that moment in the river, when God's love was real and it was true and it was everywhere. And that's what our baptism is meant to be too. It's meant to be a moment when we know that we are God's daughter, God's son. And that because we are here offering our shabby little live to God, God is pleased with us. No matter what the world says. We are God's beloved. You are. I am. We are God's beloved. Hold on to that. No matter what. Find practices, prayers, meditations, exercises, any way, every way that reminds you that you have God's heart. God's love is meant for you. And you are meant for God.

We receive that love but we know that we cannot hold all that love. We know, like Jesus, it is meant to be poured out into the world. And it will

require something of a pouring out of ourselves. It will require us to surrender an old life for a new one. It will require us to let go of whatever fills our lives that does not fill us with the Spirit of God. It will require us to let go of worldly things because they do not love us or give us life. God does. And God wants us to be part of something so much more than ourselves.

Let us remember our baptism today. The heavens are opened and God's love is poured out upon us right where we are, wherever we are. Poured out for us and for a world that is so unloved. A world that feels so separated from God. So separated from life. Heaven is opened and God's Spirit has descended and it is all around us. And God's voice is saying to you, to me, and to all people in the messiness of their lives: I have called you by name; you are mine. You are my son, my daughter, my beloved. In you I am well pleased.