

Beloved

Rev. Dr. Leah Grundset Davis
Ravensworth Baptist Church
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Matthew 3:13–17

It was a cold and blustery November Sunday morning. It was one of those November mornings where the air and the wind went straight to the bone.

It also happened to be when I was 16 years old and it was finally the day I was getting baptized. As you can imagine, I was thrilled and had contemplated my decision to be baptized for a while. My baptism took place just down the road from here on 123 in Fairfax Station, at the Baptist church I grew up in.

Right before it was time to step into the waters of baptism, in front of my family and my church family, my youth minister turned to me and said, “they just told me that the heater’s broken. It’s going to feel like ice.” He wasn’t lying.

I felt like I was unwittingly participating in one of those arctic plunges that people do in lakes outside in the middle of winter. Except, this plunge was in front of the church during morning worship. We made it through, both of us with teeth chattering and I can honestly tell you that when I went under that water and came back up, I felt like I was being raised to walk in a new way of life. I have an extremely vivid memory of water pooling off my face and my youth minister and I racing to get out of the baptistery as quickly as we could. There were no extra words of blessing, no moments of reflection. I had been baptized, and it was time to get out of there.

Baptisms are funny things. They’re meant to be a public witness and a personal moment of conviction in this following after Jesus, but there’s just so much humanity in them. Which makes sense, because we are human, after all. Take for example, the ten-year-old getting baptized by immersion who hadn’t seen the baptistery before and cannon-balled into the water, soaking the choir. Or the baby who was being baptized and screamed the whole time, spitting up on the weary-looking priest. Or the pastor baptizing for the first time who didn’t have a good enough grip and accidentally dropped the person being baptized.

All you have to do is search for these on YouTube and you will find countless baptism videos. What? Only pastors search YouTube for baptism clips? That’s weird.

But the moment, full of humanity, full of ice-cold water or crying babies or soaked choir members, it a sacred moment. It’s something we all say as followers of Jesus that we are doing together. We’re in it together as followers of Jesus, witnessing to his life, death, and resurrection.

Around here, at Ravensworth, we practice baptism by immersion. That’s a fancy way to say, you get dunked. If anyone is interested, join me after worship and we’ll take a walk up to see inside the baptistery—it’s right under that cross and it’s fun to see it with or without water. There’s no water so we won’t have any impromptu baptisms.

Baptists practice baptism by dunking and believer’s baptism, meaning that we believe that each person gets to decide when they are ready to be baptized. And we believe that baptism is a sign of God’s grace with us—it in itself is not a saving act. We are saved

because of God's unconditional love. When we enter into the waters of baptism, we feel it from the tips of our toes all the way to the tops of our heads.

Who was baptized here at RBC?

Baptists have practiced this since the beginning of Baptists and in fact, it's a principle that the earliest Baptists died for the right the believe. When I baptize someone, I always proclaim the words, "buried with Christ in baptism," and when they come up from the water I say, "raised to walk in a new way of life—a life of beloved-ness."

We participate in the ancient rite of baptism because it has faith formational elements for us. It's what we do as a public witness to the radically inclusive love of God at work in the world.

We do it as a way to signify we are God's beloved children just like everyone else and we have chosen to mark ourselves in the waters of baptism. Across denominations, we might have different practices and theology surrounding baptism, but it's something we all do, it's a ritual that we participate in.

We know why we practice baptism—it's part of our faith tradition, it's part of our communal identity in following Jesus.

But why did Jesus get baptized? It's a question that all the gospel writers struggle with—each of them. They know they need to include the story, but aren't quite comfortable with what the story might imply.

Remember that the writers are telling about their Jesus that they want to tell about. Each one has their own interpretation, not any different from all of us in this room. Matthew gives us a longer introduction in chapter three to John the Baptist. Hear these earlier words in chapter 3:

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Why are the people coming for baptism? For repentance. I guess there was a line down by the river that day and Jesus got in line with the rest of the people. The religious leaders had already passed through—Jesus watched them from the riverbank as his cousin

provoked them. Maybe he took mental notes on who was at the river that day, as his toes sunk into the mud and he waited his turn.

According to Matthew, John the Baptist wasn't all too sure about why Jesus was coming either. It wasn't part of Jesus' faith formation, it wasn't expected of him. Michael Catlett has suggested that Jesus went to be baptized because "it was the next right thing" for him to do. As he climbed down into the muddy water and made his way out to his rough and tumble cousin, John said, "I need to be baptized by you—why are you coming to me?" And Jesus said, "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism."

And still this baptism is different from the baptisms we receive. Jesus wasn't baptized in his own name. John the Baptist didn't say to him, "buried with yourself in baptism and raised to walk in a new way of life."

Jesus was baptized and came up from the water seeing the heavens torn open and saw Holy Spirit coming at him like a dove. And then everyone heard a voice from heaven that said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And that's the end of the scene. Jesus has God's blessing of belovedness—not all so different from our baptisms in the idea of knowing you are loved and yet, it meant something all together different for him. This was a proclamation of his identity for the very first time with a divine interruption and announcement. And the announcement was just that he was beloved.

Jesus was God's beloved and God was well pleased with him. That's it!

And when we come up from the water, we hear similar words. And when we are in worship, we hear these words repeated: you are God's beloved. And when Steve gave his benediction he said, "go and be who you already are—beloved sons and daughters of God." This is who we are. This is who we were created to be. Baptism doesn't create it in is, it's a moment to mark it though.

Henri Nouwen, Catholic priest, wrote much on this idea of beloved-ness, sharing about his own struggle to believe it. He had no trouble believing in other folks' beloved-ness, but he wrestled with his own:

"Personally, as my struggle reveals, I don't often "feel" like a beloved child of God. But I know that that is my most primal identity and I know that I must choose it above and beyond my hesitations.

Strong emotions, self-rejection, and even self-hatred justifiably toss you about, but you are free to respond as you will. You are not what others, or even you, think about yourself. You are not what you do. You are not what you have. You are a full member of the human family, having been known before you were conceived and molded in your mother's womb. In times when you feel bad about yourself, try to choose to remain true to the truth of who you really are.

Look in the mirror each day and claim your true identity. Act ahead of your feelings and trust that one day your feelings will match your convictions. Choose now and continue to

choose this incredible truth. As a spiritual practice claim and reclaim your primal identity as beloved daughter or son of a personal Creator.”¹

Today as we consider our baptism and remember all the ways we are beautifully and wonderfully made, choose this spiritual practice, in the words of Henri Nouwen: “As a spiritual practice, claim and reclaim your primal identity as a beloved daughter or son of a personal Creator.”

Remember your baptism in these moments or the formational elements that made you the person that you are. Consider what it might mean for you to be baptized as a witness to yourself and everyone of God’s beloved-ness at work in the world. When you wash your hands later today, be aware of it hitting your hands as a reminder of your beloved-ness. Leave this day remembering that Jesus stepped into the water just like all of us.

You are God’s beloved child. And with you, God is well pleased.

Amen.

¹ Henri Nouwen, henrinouwen.org