

**The Light of Identity**  
Richmond's First Baptist Church, January 8, 2017  
Baptism of the Lord  
*Matthew 3:13-17*

*And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

You may have heard about an event we are hosting here at the end of the month. It's called the "Hearts Afire Storytelling Festival," January 27-29, and it features three of the best storytellers in America: Tim Lowrey, Sheila Arnold Jones, and Linda Goodman. If you haven't already bought your tickets I hope you will because it's going to be amazing, and the perfect thing to do on a cold winter weekend. You can find more information on our website at [www.fbrichmond.org](http://www.fbrichmond.org). But here's the thing about a storytelling festival: each storyteller is different. Each one has a unique style and voice. And even if they tell the same stories, they tell them in a different way.

That's a good thing to remember when we open up our Bibles, because in the first four books of the New Testament there's a kind of storytelling festival going on. One at a time Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, step out on the stage to tell us their stories of Jesus. All of them are stories about the same person, but all of them are different, and that can be a little confusing. For example, we've just come through the season of Christmas, where we've heard two different versions of the Christmas story—Matthew's and Luke's. Sometimes we get the details mixed up, and think the shepherds and the wise men ended up in the same nativity scene. But maybe we could do better than that in this new year. Maybe we could let each of these Gospel storytellers tell the story of Jesus in just the way

he wants, and maybe we could be grateful for the differences.

I sometimes say that if there has been an accident at a busy intersection, the investigating officer will be grateful if there were four witnesses, one standing at each corner. That gives him four different perspectives on the same event. And even though there was only one accident, and his final report will tell only one story, it will be informed by four different stories, and because of that he will have a better, clearer picture of “what really happened” than if there had been only one witness. In the same way we should be grateful for the four different perspectives we have on Jesus, and the four different witnesses who provide them.

Matthew, for example.

This is Year A in the three-year lectionary cycle, which is Matthew’s year. From now until Advent we will spend more time in the Gospel of Matthew than any other Gospel. For that reason today might be a good day to let him step out on the stage all by himself, and tell his version of the Jesus story, or at least the beginning of it.

- It begins in an interesting way, with the genealogy of Jesus. If you’ve ever been asked to read it aloud you know how hard it is to pronounce some of those names. You may wonder why Matthew started his Gospel like that. But I think he wants us to know that this is not a new story, but the continuation of a story God has been writing from the very beginning, from the time he called Abraham and promised that through him the nations of the world would be blessed. I think Matthew wants us to see Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise. And so he tells us that there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, and fourteen generations from David to the time of the Exile, and fourteen generations from the

Exile to Jesus, the Messiah.

- And then he tells us how the birth of the Messiah took place, and his version is very different from the Christmas story we usually hear. According to Matthew Joseph and Mary didn't travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem: they already lived there, though not in the same house. But after Joseph had a dream telling him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife he did take her—he married her—and brought her into his own home, but did not have marital relations with her until she gave birth to a son, and he named him Jesus. So, no stable, no angels, no shepherds in Matthew's Christmas story: just a newlywed couple having a baby at home.
- And then, after a year or so, they got a visit from some magi from the east. Jesus would have been a toddler by then, a beautiful brown-eyed boy clinging to his mother's skirts, staring at those wise men. We don't know how many of them there were; there might have been two, there might have been twenty. But they came bringing gifts for the new king of the Jews after learning from Herod's wise men where that new king might have been born, and following a strange star that came to rest over his house.
- And can I pause long enough to tell you how much I love the image of that star shining over that house? Because this is the story we tell on the Day of Epiphany, January 6: we tell the story of the wise men coming to visit Jesus. All they had was the light of that star to guide them to his house, and I can almost see the starlight shining on his beautiful face, reflecting in those big brown eyes. But in the same way the days get longer and longer at this time of year, the light that

shines on Jesus gets brighter and brighter on these Sundays after Epiphany; we see him more clearly for who he really is, so that by the time we reach the end of this season—Transfiguration Sunday—his face will be shining like the sun! But I'm getting ahead of myself...

- The wise men were warned in a dream not to go back to King Herod, and not to tell him that they had found the child, but to go home another way. And when Herod found he had been tricked he was furious. He rounded up his troops and sent them to Bethlehem, to kill every baby boy under two years old. But Joseph was warned in a dream to get up that very night, to take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and that's what he did. Good old Joseph. Good old faithful, obedient Joseph. When Herod died he brought his family back to Israel, but when he heard that Herod's son was on the throne he kept moving, and settled his family in Nazareth. That's where Jesus grew up. That's where he learned his father's trade. And that's where he was when he got the news about John the Baptist, which brings us to our text for today.

Matthew says that Jesus came to be baptized by John in the Jordan, and when he did John protested. "Why are you coming to me?" he said. "I should be baptized by you!" But Jesus said, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." What that means, says New Testament scholar Warren Carter, is that Jesus is "committed to living out the will of God, committed to being the agent of God's salvation" (Mt. 1:21-23), and that his actions are "consistent with that commitment."<sup>1</sup> "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness," Jesus says to John, and whatever else it may mean, it seems to mean that in that time, and at that place, it was the right

thing to do. And so John did it; he baptized Jesus. And just when he came up from the water he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit descending like a dove, and heard a voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” It is the most intimate statement of Jesus’ identity you will find anywhere in scripture, but perhaps it is also a clue to your identity, and to mine. Listen:

1. **“This is my Son.”** While Jesus was the Son of God in a unique way I believe that every person is a child of God in some way. It doesn’t matter if you are Jewish or Christian, Hindu or Muslim: if you are a human being you are a child of God. And this is essential to your understanding of your identity. Think about it: when we make mistakes don’t we sometimes say, “Well, what did you expect? I’m only human!” How would it change things to say, “I’m only a child of God!” Wouldn’t you begin to expect more of yourself? Wouldn’t everybody?
2. **“The Beloved.”** Now, this is where it gets tricky, because no son was more beloved than Jesus, and yet I believe that we, too, can be called God’s “beloved.” When I was studying the doctrine of baptism in seminary, and especially that passage from Romans 6, where Paul talks about it, I came to believe that for Paul being baptized was like soaking a sponge in water until it is fully saturated, except for him it meant being immersed in Christ until he was fully saturated. In other places he talked about being “in Christ Jesus,” and I think he meant that almost literally. If we are “in” Christ Jesus, and if Christ Jesus is “in” us, then we share in his identity: if he is beloved, so are we.
3. **“In whom I am well pleased.”** And this is where it gets trickier still, because surely there is no one who has pleased God more than Jesus, but I believe that we,

too, are capable of pleasing him. Sometimes when I am dedicating babies I will tell parents that I am dedicating their child's life to the glory of God, and I tell them that in the Bible the word *glory* is almost always associated with light. "So, I've come to think of it this way," I say: "to dedicate your child's life to the glory of God is to say that I hope this child's life will make the Heavenly Father's face light up." If all of us are God's children, and if those of us who are "in Christ" are his beloved, don't you think some of us, at least, could make the Father's face light up, could live lives in which he was "well pleased"?

It may not take as much as you think. I was walking into the Jewish Community Center last week, where I work out, and there was a little girl coming out, telling her mother, "I made a friend today, a new friend. His name is Duncan. He's sooooo nice!" It made my face light up, just to hear this little girl talk about making a new friend. Don't you think we have it in us to do something that would make the Heavenly Father's face light up?

When I was talking with some other preachers about this passage last week one of them said, "My translation doesn't say 'well pleased.' It says, 'My son, the Beloved, in whom I take delight.'" And everybody seemed to like that better than "well-pleased." Like me they didn't want their congregations to think you had to go around trying to please God all the time. That could lead to a kind of "works-righteousness" where we think we are saved by what we do, rather than by what Jesus has done. They liked the word *delight*. One of them said, "You don't have to do all that much to delight God." And then he shared his own story, about something his son had done that seemed so small, so insignificant, and yet it delighted the heart of his father. And that's probably

true: if you have children of your own, and if you love them, you know they don't have to do much to make your face light up. Christy and I used to sneak into the nursery and look at our children when they were sleeping. They weren't doing anything, and yet we had to get out of the room before the light from our faces woke them up.

There's one other way to think about that word. Again it's Warren Carter, the New Testament scholar, who suggests that what God is saying here is, "This is my Son, the Beloved, the One I have chosen." He says that's a better translation than "well pleased."<sup>ii</sup> And it works in this passage because so far in Matthew's story Jesus hasn't done anything at all—nothing that would please or displease the Father. But it doesn't mean that God hasn't chosen him for this important role. You may recall that when David was anointed king he hadn't done anything to deserve that title, not yet, but God looked on him, loved him, and picked him out from among his brothers. "This is the one," he told Samuel. "Anoint him." Do you think that's what God is doing here? Looking on his Son, Jesus, calling him Beloved, and choosing him above all others to be the agent of God's salvation? And what would it do to our own sense of identity, to believe that we were not only God's children, but God's beloved children, and to believe that God had chosen us, too, to help him fulfill his mission?

I've told you about that picture I saw in *National Geographic* years ago, of a man being baptized in the Jordan River. It was at that place just downstream from the Sea of Galilee where they used to take all the tourists, miles away from the place where Jesus was actually baptized but the Jordan River all the same. I'm not sure when the picture was taken but it shows a young, bearded man coming up out of the water. He looks to be about thirty years old. His wet, white robe has become translucent, and through it you can

see big orange letters on his T-shirt spelling out the word “Tennessee.” His arms are raised, his head is lifted up, and his eyes appear to be fixed on something no one else can see. Is it a dove, fluttering down from the sky to rest upon him? The caption beside the picture identifies him as Jerry Yother, a nuclear technician and an ordained minister from Chattanooga. “I can tell you exactly what I was thinking here,” he said. “I’m hearing God say, ‘This is my son, Jerry, in whom I am well pleased.’”

It sounds a little arrogant, doesn’t it? A little self-righteous? We turn up our noses at that kind of thing. “Well, aren’t you special? Look everybody, it’s Jerry Yother from Tennessee, the beloved son of God!” But maybe he had it right. Maybe we are all the children of God, and maybe we are all beloved, and maybe we have all been chosen. What if you threw back the covers and got out of bed tomorrow as if you were coming up out of the waters of baptism? What if you lived the rest of your life as if you were beloved and chosen? Don’t you think it would please God? Don’t you think it would delight his heart? Don’t you think it would make the Father’s face light up?

—*Jim Somerville* ©2017

---

<sup>i</sup> Warren Carter, commenting on Matthew 3:13-17 on the [Working Preacher](#) website.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.