Sermon on Matthew 3:13–17

There are so many moments in life when we wonder where we stand. We ask ourselves questions like, “Am I doing enough? Am I too much? Do I matter to anyone beyond what I can produce? Would I still be loved if I failed again?”

I can remember a time during seminary where my depression and anxiety reared their heads in an ugly way, and I found myself asking the question if anyone truly liked me. If they would notice if I weren’t there. I had begun to replay a false story over and over again in my head that said I was unlovable and unworthy. I had a hard time believing that anyone could love me. I had a hard time believing that God could love me.

Many of us can probably relate to that feeling at some point in our lives. We wonder about our lovability. And we wonder, if in fact, God loves us, if that love is fragile – love that lasts only as long as we behave, only as long as we believe correctly, or only as long as we keep our faith nice and tidy and unquestioning.

Well today, the Scripture lesson we read gives us a gift: the story of the baptism of Jesus. This story isn’t just a story kicking off Jesus’ mission and ministry – instead, it sets the whole tone for God’s story of salvation. It is like a window into the heart of God, where we can hear the voice we most need to hear: “You are beloved.”

This is actually a radical claim, but to hear how radical it is, we need to better understand the context of Jesus’ baptism.

When Matthew introduces John the Baptist, he is not giving us a sweet devotional figure or a quiet mystic kind of guy. John is an apocalyptic preacher. He’s a disruptor. He stirring the pot. John is out in the wilderness. He’s not in the Temple, he’s not in Jerusalem’s respectable religious spaces conducting nice church services John is not conducting business as usual.

John is crying out, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” That word “repent” means “turn around,” “change direction,” “reorient your life.” And the people are responding - Crowds go out to him. They confess. They are baptized. Maybe that still doesn’t sound so radical – perhaps more like a big tent revival

But, in John and Jesus’ day, this would have given pause. It wasn’t how things were normally done. In first-century Judaism, water and washing already mattered a great deal. Purity washings were common. The mikveh baths were used for ritual purification, especially before worship. Priests washed. People washed. But those washings were repeated rituals. Part of an ongoing system. “Baptism” was something that was done over and over again.

What John is doing is different. John is offering a one-time baptism, a decisive moment, not inside Temple control, but out in the wilderness, and he's saying it's about forgiveness, repentance, and readiness for God's reign. In other words: John is leading something like a renewal movement, even an implicit protest to the status quo.

John is also doing this in a very specific place. John is baptizing in the Jordan River for a reason. In Israel's story, the Jordan is not just a river. It's a boundary – it's a place of significance. The Jordan is where Israel crossed from wilderness wandering into the promised land. So when people go out into the wilderness, and they pass through the water of the Jordan, it is not only a personal spiritual moment – there is also a broader communal narrative being invoked.

It's like they are saying: "We are starting over. We are crossing over. We are leaving behind what enslaves us. We are stepping into God's future." It's Exodus imagery, which is liberation imagery, as we've talked about before. And if you're living under Roman occupation, as John's followers were, living under taxation, land loss, constant surveillance and threat of violence, then "starting over" is not just about private spiritual piety. It's about hope. It's about longing for God to act again like God acted in the Exodus, liberating, delivering, breaking chains, toppling oppressive power.

In his call to repentance and baptism, John is essentially calling Israel back to its roots: "Remember who you are. Remember whose you are. Remember that Pharaoh is not the end of the story. There is hope for you and a future." So people stream out to the Jordan as a people aching for liberation.

But then Jesus shows up. Matthew tells us, "Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him." This is already significant. Galilee is not the center of religious power. It's no Jerusalem. It's a region that's often sneered at as backwater. Jesus comes from the margins into a movement of renewal and resistance.

And John tries to stop him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John knows what his baptism is for: it's for repentance and confession, and being washed clean from sin.

But Jesus insists on John baptizing him, saying: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." That phrase "fulfill all righteousness" doesn't mean checking a religious obligation off of a checklist. In Matthew's gospel, "righteousness" has to do with God setting the world right – with God's justice, God's saving action, God's covenant faithfulness.

So when Jesus insists on being baptized by John, he is saying, "This is where I begin. This is how God's justice is going to take shape." Jesus steps into a baptism meant for sinners not

because he needs cleansing, but because we do. He steps into the water not as a spectator but as a participant. He enters the water with us. He enters fully into the human condition. He stands in line with the people. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, “that which Christ did not assume, he did not redeem.” In other words, Christ enters fully into the human experience to show us the way and to make us new. Christ enters into the human experience alongside the hungry, the burdened, the ashamed, the desperate, the oppressed, the ones longing for God to do something.

Jesus does not begin his ministry by separating himself from messy, complicated people. He begins by joining them.

And so we come to the moment of baptism, where Matthew captures this beautiful moment. ”When Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened.” That’s not just a pretty picture, though. In Scripture, the idea of the heavens being opened is a sign that God is intervening, that a barrier is breaking, that God’s voice and God’s Spirit are about to move. Then the Spirit descends “like a dove.” That’s biblical imagery too. At the beginning of Genesis, God’s Spirit hovers over the waters of creation. And after the flood, the dove becomes a sign of renewed creation, new beginnings. So when the Spirit descends like a dove over Jesus at the waters of baptism, Matthew is painting a theological picture: that this is not only the beginning of Jesus’ ministry., it is the beginning of God’s new creation. The world is being remade.

And it’s not through Caesar’s power, or through violence. It’s being remade through the Spirit, through the one who enters the waters with the people.

And then comes the voice: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” That line echoes words from the prophet Isaiah: “Beloved” and “with whom I am well pleased” echoes Isaiah’s Servant Songs, especially Isaiah 42: “Here is my servant… my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him.”

So what is God saying? Yes, God is declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, but he’s not the kind of Messiah people expected. But Isaiah’s servant points toward a suffering servant: gentle, faithful, justice-bringing, not crushing the weak. So in the baptism, God is saying: This is the true King! This is the liberator! This is the Servant! This is my chosen One!

And then the Spirit rests on him to empower a ministry that will confront evil not by becoming a bigger, badder Caesar, but by embodying God’s reign.

But here’s what’s at the heart of it all:

This moment happens before Jesus has preached. Before he's healed. Before he's gathered disciples. Before he's done anything impressive. God calls him beloved before he has done anything that seems important. Jesus' identity is not earned, it's given.

And if Jesus' identity begins there, then so so does ours. In this story, we see that baptism is God's first move toward Jesus, and it is God's first move towards us. This is why baptism matters. Jesus shows us that baptism is not first and foremost about our move towards God. If baptism were mainly about our decision, then it would only be as strong as our decision-making skills. And we'd be in trouble. Because I don't know about you, but sometimes my faith wavers. My courage comes and goes. My consistency leaves something to be desire.

Baptism isn't first about our vow. It's first about God's vow. It's about God's grace coming before understanding. It's about love coming before our "worthiness." In the Methodist tradition, we talk about something called prevenient grace – the grace that is present and moving in our lives before we are even aware of it. That's why we baptize infants. Baptism is not about proving we're ready or that we've got it all together. Baptism is about proclaiming that God is merciful, and that God claims us before we can claim God.

Baptism is a naming. We name people. Because the world is constantly trying to rename us: Failure, burden, unclean, too much, not enough, disposable.

Nadia Bolz Weber tells a story about baptizing a trans woman who had carried deep church-inflicted shame and fear, especially about whether God could love her, whether the church would claim her, whether she could ever belong. At the font, Nadia uses the person's chosen name. And in the baptismal moment the woman was named publicly, lovingly, without hesitation. Nadia describes the woman's response as an overwhelming moment of relief and release, like finally hearing what she had needed her whole life: **that God's love is not theoretical** or conditional and God knows her, not as a mistake, but as beloved.

Baptism, in many ways, is holy defiance against every voice that ever tries to tell us that we are unworthy, unwelcome, or unloved. In baptism, God interrupts the naming systems of empire. Baptism is God saying: "You are not what Rome calls you. You are not what shame calls you. You are not what fear calls you."

In baptism, God speaks a truer name: "Beloved Child. Mine."

Jesus' baptism is not only historical. It's a template. He goes into the water, he rises, the Spirit comes, the voice declares belovedness. This is the shape of baptismal life: We die to what enslaves us, we rise into grace, we receive the Spirit, ad we live from a place of belovedness.

Today, we will remember our baptism – we will remember our belovedness, which no one can take away from us. And consequently, which we cannot take away from anyone else either. And so when we hear words in the world around us about this person or that person as disposable or somehow deserving what they have gotten, God tells us, “No. I have called all people my beloved children. No one is disposable. No one is unworthy. No one is unlovable.”

And baptism becomes a way in which we live into the Exodus story of liberation: we cross again and again from fear to freedom, from shame to belovedness, from empire’s story to God’s story.

At the Jordan River, Israel’s river of crossing, of freedom, of starting over, Jesus steps into the water with the people. The Spirit descends like the dawn of new creation. And the voice of God names him beloved.

And in Christ, that voice is spoken over us, too. Not because we earned it or because we proved ourselves, but because God is the kind of God who makes the first move. God is the kind of God who calls you by name and means it. You are God’s beloved child. May you know it today without a doubt. Amen.