

“YOU ARE MY BELOVED”

Rev. Becky Stephens

Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 NLT

God’s Word: Isaiah 43:1-7 NLT

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¹⁵ Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered their questions by saying, “I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.”

²¹ One day when the crowds were being baptized, Jesus himself was baptized. As he was praying, the heavens opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit, in bodily form, descended on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, “You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.”

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John White tells the story of his days as a medical student. For one of his classes, he missed a practicum about venereal disease and had to make it up at the clinic. When he arrived at the clinic he ended up in a line with a bunch of patients who had actually contracted a venereal disease.

White barged up to the front and told the head nurse, "I need to see the doctor." "That's what everybody says," said the nurse, "now get in line."

"But I'm a medical student."

"Big deal," said the nurse, "You got it the same way as everybody else; now you can stand in line like everybody else."

Eventually White was able to explain to the nurse why he was there, but he writes that he can still feel the sense of shame and superiority that made him balk at the idea of standing in line with the people who had venereal disease.

In Luke Chapter 3, we are told that John the Baptist “*went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...*” and “*crowds*” of people were coming to be baptized by him.

Was John the one whom they had been waiting for? Was he the Messiah? Was he God-Made-Flesh? Would he save them from their sins and bring them new life?

We are told that *“the people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.”* But John put a stop to that.

*“I’m just a sinner like you. The Christ you wondering about is so great that I’m not even worthy to untie His sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”*

And then we are told that *“When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.”* Jesus got in line with all the other folks—with all the sinners who were in desperate need of repentance, forgiveness and salvation—even though, He Himself did not need to repent, be forgiven and be saved.

Does this surprise you? I think it’s safe to say that John the Baptist was surprised! Or at least, as surprised as we should be if we were to read this passage of Scripture without knowing what is coming.

Imagine you are going to a huge rock concert, packed to the doors with eager and excited fans. Everyone has their earplugs in; they are waiting for the thunderous music to begin. This will be music for a battle, for a victory, thunder and lightning and explosions of crazy noise! The concert promoter comes on stage and declares that the famous musician has arrived... *“Elvis is in the building,”* if you will. Everyone gets on their feet, to welcome the man who is going to fulfill their expectations.

As you stand there eagerly, a small figure comes on the stage. He doesn’t look at all like what you expected. He is carrying, not an electric guitar, but a small flute. As you watch, shocked into silence, He plays, gently and softly, a tune quite different to what you had imagined. But as you listen, you start to hear familiar themes played in a new way. The music is haunting and fragile, winding its way into your imaginations and hopes and transforming them. And, as the song comes to its close, as though at a signal, the drums, bass and guitars respond with a new version of the music you had been expecting all along.

Now listen to John as the concert promoter, whipping you into excitement about the hero who is about to appear: *“He’s coming! He’s more powerful than me! He will give you God’s wind and God’s fire, not just water! He’ll sort you out—He’ll clear out the mess—He’ll clean up God’s farm so that only the good wheat is left!”*

We’re on our feet, expecting a great leader, perhaps the Living God Himself, sweeping into the arena with a great explosion, a blaze of light and color, transforming everything in a single blow! And instead we get Jesus.

The Jesus we have only met so far...as a baby with a price on His head. A Jesus who comes and stands humbly before John, asking for baptism, along with everyone else who has been broken by the *“wear and tear”* of this world.

A Jesus who is identifying Himself, not with a God who sweeps everyone before Him in judgment, but who is WITH the people who are themselves facing that judgment and need to repent!

John, of course, is horrified! Why would Jesus be coming to be baptized? What’s happened to the agenda? What’s happened to the wind and fire, to the clearing out of God’s barn? Surely, if anything he, John, needs to be baptized by Jesus himself!

Jesus' actions tell us something vital about the whole Gospel Story. Yes, Jesus is coming to fulfill God's plans, the promises which God made ages ago and has never forgotten. Yes, these are promises that will blow God's Spirit through the world, which will bring the fire of God's just judgment on evil wherever it occurs, and which will rescue us once and for all.

But Jesus is going to do this by humbling Himself...identifying Himself with you and with me...by taking our place...by sharing our sorrows...by living our lives...and ultimately dying our death!

Part of the challenge of our Scripture Lesson for this morning is to learn to be surprised by Jesus! Because Jesus comes to fulfill God's plans, not ours! Jesus will not always play the music we expect. But if we learn to listen carefully to what He says, and watch carefully what He does...we will find that our real longings, our real hunger will be met!

And those of us, who in repentance and faith, follow Jesus through baptism and along the road He will lead will find, in unimagined glory, that the same voice that speaks to Jesus from heaven speaks to us as well!!! And as we learn to put aside our own plans and submit to Christ's plans we will be given times of vision, glimpses of God's greater reality!!! And at the center of all this, we will find our loving Father, affirming us as His children, equipping us, too, with His Spirit so that our lives can be swept clean and made ready for use!!!

Isn't that something? The whole Christian Gospel could be summed up in this point: When the Living God looks at us God sees us, not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ! It sometimes seems nearly impossible to believe, especially to those of us who have never had this kind of support from our earthly parents, but it's true!!! God looks at you; God looks at me, and says, "You are my dear, dear child; I'm delighted with you!" Think about that! God says that, not only at your baptism, but also, every day since!!!

Baptism is something that God does for us—it is not something we can possibly do for ourselves nor earn! That's why we only baptize persons once. God got it right the first time!

Can we live into believing that? If so, our lives will be filled with the Holy Spirit and with fire!!! Without the affirming Words from God, all we often hear, in our mind's ear, is doors being slammed!!!

"You're not good enough!"

"You are stupid!"

"You are ugly!"

"You are unlovable!"

God never sees us this way. And that is the greatest news in the entire universe!!!

Luke tells us that when Jesus was baptized, *"And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove."* Heaven was opened, the Kingdom of God had come to this earth!!! A different reality had emerged!!! And a good deal of the Christian faith is about learning to live by this different reality even when we can't see it!

All around us we see desperation and decay. We see men, women and children living separate lives

But remember, heaven has been opened. God has blazed the Way! There is a different Reality. The Holy Spirit has descended; there is hope, there is a future and grace abounds!!!

As Christians, when we look at this life, and learn to see it and hear it in the NEW REALITY, in the Heavenly Voice...We will hear God's Word's addressed to ourselves and to others! *"You are my son, my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

Periodically, Olivia will ask me: "Mommy, why do you love me so much?"

And that's a hard question to answer. I just loved everything about her, even when she was having a fit!

Now, just imagine how much more Your Heavenly Father loves YOU!!! Life isn't so bad after-all, is it? God loves you more than you can imagine!

Let's learn to hear the Words addressed to Jesus—addressed to ourselves as well!

Let's allow those Words to change us, mold us, make us somebody new...the person God wants us to be! When we do this, we will be equipped, as Jesus was, to be sent into the desert of this world.

If we try and journey the Christian life thinking that our God is a bully, an angry threatening parent ready to yell at us, slam the door on us, or kick us out into the street because we haven't quite made the grade, we will fail at the first whisper of temptation. But if we remember THE VOICE that speaks those powerful WORDS of LOVE we will find the way through victoriously!!!

Jesus isn't a rock star. Jesus doesn't come crashing onstage spitting blood and breathing fire! Instead, Jesus walks humbly through our world, seeking the lost, frightened and broken. And this is the Way we are called to go as well.

And we can do it...because...because...God is delighted with us...so take God's Words of love, acceptance and life with you and live life to the full!!!

Accept that Jesus accepts and loves you—allow Him to be your Lord, your Savior.

And learn to love God, yourselves and others in the same way God loves you! That is what baptism is about. It's about accepting the fact that God loves and accepts us.

This morning, we all have an opportunity to remember how much God loves us, by coming up, touching the baptismal waters and remembering and thanking God that we have been baptized.

At our baptism, God says to us, what God said to Jesus 2,000 years ago: *"You are my [son or daughter] whom I love; with you I am well pleased."* Let those words wash over you this morning. Listen as God says them to you. Put your name in there: *"Becky, you are my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

If you have not been baptized use this time as an anticipation of your baptism, and speak to me or Pastor Mike about being baptized in the future.