

First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Jesus
January 12, 2020
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Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

The past few years, we've handed out stars to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. Our stars recall the Magi, following a star that led them to the holy child, Jesus. (There may yet be a few stars ... come join us at the forum this morning and get one of your own – while supplies last!)

On each of the stars, there's a word. As you reached in to pick a star, I reminded you that the word on *your* star had chosen you. Some of you may like the word you get. Some of you most certainly do not. Either way, take some care: the reason why your word chose you may not be immediately obvious; give it some time, work with it. You have all year to ponder your word.

Nobody here pulled out a star with the word "righteousness" last week. I'd have remembered that. And I'm pretty sure most of you wouldn't want it if you had. I don't know many people who aspire to be righteous, at least not in our day; it carries unappealing connotations ... the smugly self-righteous "church lady" Dana Carvey used to play on Saturday Night Live.

All the same, I think Jesus carried a word or two with him that day he presented himself to be baptized in the River Jordan. No stars, so far as we can tell, but he had "righteousness" in hand.

There are hints that the baptism of Jesus by John was confusing to early Christians. If John baptized Jesus, does that imply that John was the teacher and Jesus the disciple? If John came preaching a baptism of repentance, does that suggest Jesus needed John's forgiveness?

It looks like Matthew thought he had a way around the confusion. Matthew tells us that Jesus and John argued about it. John said it should be the other way around, but Jesus tells him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." In Matthew's gospel, these are the very first words out of Jesus' mouth. So it's important, at least to Matthew.

According to Matthew, Jesus found the word righteousness helpful. Maybe he had to spend some time with the word. Maybe he had to work with it to figure out its importance.

And yet its meaning is likely less clear to most of us. When Jesus says he should be baptized to "fulfill all righteousness," it might be enough to say that Jesus is trying to say that he needed to be baptized simply because it was the right thing to do.

I'm reminded of a sermon by Ed Bacon. He said he preferred to translate "righteousness" as "being aligned." Righteousness has nothing to do with being unlovingly judgmental, condescending, and separate from others (like Dana Carvey's "church lady"). Those are the very attitudes that put us out of alignment with the God of love and the love of God.

For Jesus, righteousness meant lining up to join anyone and everyone else being baptized that day. Rather than remain aloof and set apart, he got wet. As one commentator describes the significance of it all:

[Jesus] allied himself with ... all the broken and hurting people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us and among us. Not long into his public mission, the sanctimonious religious leaders derided Jesus as a "friend of gluttons and sinners." They were surely right about that.

With his baptism Jesus openly and decisively declared that he stands shoulder to shoulder with me in my fears and anxieties. He intentionally takes sides with [us in our] neediness, and declares that God is biased in [our] favor ... ⁱ

That's what the word righteousness had come to mean for Jesus.

And that's the moment, as I hear it, that Jesus was given a new word: "Beloved."

It wasn't written on a star he pulled out of a bag. But it came from heaven: the heavens opened, the Spirit descended, and a voice declared the word to anyone listening:

This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.

It's an astonishing word, a beautiful word. To be beloved is to be adored. To be beloved is to be cherished. To be beloved is to be treasured.

And the thing I notice about all this is Jesus hasn't done anything obvious to deserve such acclaim. He's offered no great teaching. He's performed no miracle. All he's done is get down and dirty with the rest of humanity, rejecting any high horse or privilege ... and all in the name of righteousness.

And of course everything Jesus does follows this moment when his righteousness and God's belovedness kiss each other. From this moment on, Jesus goes out to share with others the star-word given him at baptism.

John Shea observes that the gospel stories tell us that Zacchaeus came to see and love in himself what Jesus saw and loved in him, that Mary Magdalene came to see and love in herself what Jesus saw and loved in her, that Peter came to see and love in himself what Jesus saw and loved in him. Jesus sees in them that they are Beloved, a child of God. And he sees it with such clarity and persistence that they begin to see it in themselves ... and ultimately in others, as well.

That's what happens to Peter. We see it unfold in that second reading from Acts this morning.

But what makes that story so amazing is the story behind it. For you see, Peter didn't have an Epiphany star, but I think he, too, had the word "righteousness" given to him.

But its meaning for him wasn't what he first imagined. He was on a rooftop praying one day when he had a vision of a large cloth filled with all kinds of creatures and reptiles, the kinds of food he'd always refused. For righteousness' sake, he'd always kept himself apart from foods he'd been told were "unclean." But a voice took him to task on that rooftop, saying, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." It happened three times.

And as he was trying to make sense of this vision, messengers came to his house, asking him to come to preach to a Roman Centurion, the living and breathing exemplar of everything unclean. And Peter, who had always believe he should keep himself apart, accepted the invitation. And when he got there, he preached a sermon, beginning with:

I truly understand that God shows no partiality.

Or better, it should be translated:

I truly am beginning to understand that God shows no partiality.

And then ... well, Peter is given a star-word to share. The Spirit descends on them all, and before you know it, Peter is baptizing all these dirty, unclean gentiles. And "righteousness" gets re-defined for Peter into "beloved." And so this Roman Centurion comes to see and love in himself what Peter saw and loved in him ... something Peter could do because he had come to see in himself what Jesus saw and loved in him from the first.

That's the message of baptism, the baptism of Jesus by John, the baptism of gentiles by the early followers of Jesus, the baptism of countless others down through the ages – people of all ages, nations, races, sexual orientations, languages, colors, dispositions. Children of God. Beloved.

Whatever word you may have received on a star last weekend, we are each given a new word this morning: Beloved. Take some time with it. Work with that word. Let it work on you.

We discount the good news that God has given us such a word of affirmation at our own peril. Here's a spiritual exercise for you to consider:

- 1) Remember some of the more difficult names you have ever been called by someone – or a name you've ever used against yourself – during your life. Recall the names that no matter how long ago they were uttered endure in your memory or have taken hold in your heart ... "Stupid" or "Egghead" "Fatso" or "Dog" or "Loser" or "Know-it-all" or "Victim" or _____.
- 2) Call to mind these names for one painful moment, but only for a moment – and only so you can then hear God say to you, "No! That is not your name. For you are my beloved child, and with you I am well pleased."

Whatever word-star you may have picked last week, here's your new one: "Beloved."

Ponder that word. *Beloved*. Work with it. *Beloved*. Let it dwell within you. *Beloved*.

We discount the good news of the word God gives us to our peril. And we disregard the challenging word that follows – the word that God has called all others beloved as well ... we disregard that challenging word to our shame.

The word we are given is meant to change how we see ourselves. AND it's meant to change how we see and respond to everyone we meet, as well. The star-word that has been given to you and to me has been given in the hopes that we will pass it on.

David Lose describes how easily – especially in the current political polarization ... how easily we feel niched by others. (And the truth, of course, is that we do the same others – niche them according to their differences rather than embrace them as God's beloved children.) This is what he says:

We are at a time and place where so many would like to identify and define us by many, many names: Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, American or foreigner, gay or straight, rich or poor, Black or White, and the list goes on. Additionally, we are also and increasingly named and defined by the products we use or stores at which we shop. Nike, Apple, BMW, Tiffany, Hallmark – these are not just company names, but lend a particular sense of self, and increasingly the brand labels on our shirts, shoes, cars, and computers convey a great deal of our identity. ⁱⁱ

All these names and affiliations, they may partially describe us. But they dare not define us.

We cannot settle for anything less than Beloved, the affirmation that tells us who we are – who we ALL are – children of God.

ⁱ Dan Clendenin @ <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080107II.shtml>.

ⁱⁱ David Lose @ <https://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/baptism-of-our-lord-a-family-name/>.

I add the observation that what others do to us, we readily to “them” – defining them (and judging them accordingly) according to party affiliation or any of a number of other criteria. Words/affiliations/inclinations/political parties may partially describe another, but we dare not define another in any way that falls short of acknowledging their belovedness as children of God.