

“Wonderful Words of Life”

January 12, 2020

Star Words: A Spiritual Practice for Epiphany (and Beyond) Series - Baptism of the Lord

John the Baptist is one of my favorites. His back story - his father, Zechariah, the Temple priest is unable to talk after he finds out that his wife, Elizabeth, will give birth to a son who will prepare the way for the Lord - and Elizabeth's incredible pregnancy, including being the first one to call Jesus "Lord" when Mary comes to visit her. And there's John's role in pointing others to Jesus and baptizing Jesus. We know some about him, but I invite you to hear what he might say about his experience.

SHOW MEDIA: "John the Baptist"

Wonderful words of life. "That's my boy, and I am pleased with him." I'm not sure if everyone heard those words or only those who were nearby or only John and Jesus or only Jesus. The Gospels offer some differences. However it all happened that moment is such a powerful one - to hear wonderful words of life.

I wonder if the words Jesus hears are spoken because he needs to hear them - and because we need to hear them, too. How many of us are walking around unsure about God's love for us? It's easy enough to be uncertain of the love of others for us, but what sadness to be unsure of God's love for us!

And even as I say it, I know it's true. There are so many people walking around every day, walking through life, and wondering - sometimes even doubting that they are loved by God. That uncertainty and doubt comes on for many reasons. Maybe they've never heard it. Perhaps that's hard to believe, but I know (and you do, too) that there are people who have never heard that God loves **them**.

Or maybe they've heard different words - terrible words, hurtful words, demeaning words - that make it difficult to believe that God really does love them - completely and unconditionally. Or maybe there's a barrier to accepting that love because someone, somewhere, at some time, has lied about the love of God - even in the church - saying that it's only for certain people - it's exclusive and could never possibly be available because of how they look or where they come from or who they love or something else.

We remember Jesus' baptism during the season of Epiphany because it's a moment when his identity is revealed. He is the Son of God. He is beloved. And it's a time when we hear God claiming us as children of God. We celebrate because baptism is a gift - a reminder of God's grace that we don't earn or deserve. It's a gift that we live into.

I heard Sandra Postel speak recently. She is a global water expert, and one of the first things she said was, “Water is the basis of life.” She went on to talk about our water footprint and water security - and the need for us to consider how we’re stewards of water. And she got me thinking.

Yes, water is the basis of life and in the Christian community, too. When we think about baptism, we’re thinking about how we’re stewards of the gift of water. We make promises when someone is baptized - to be a part of their spiritual journey with God. I wonder if John the Baptist thought about that as he preached and baptized and encountered people who came to him. Perhaps we’d do well to remember - like he did - that baptism is all about Jesus - always has been and always will be.

Last week, we talked about the magi and said that Epiphany is a celebration of the “showing forth” or “the revelation” of God’s presence - even to unlikely people in unlikely places. I think John the Baptist fits the bill, too. He’s an interesting character - preaching in the desert and calling people to repent and believe. I love the video, but I figure John the Baptist looked a little more “wild” than that.

Either way, who would’ve thought that Jesus would come to him (instead of the religious authorities) to receive a sign of God’s grace and to hear those wonderful words of life: “You are my son. I love you. I’m pleased with you.”

Today we also heard Isaiah’s prophecy offered to the Israelites as they were captives in Babylon without a lot of hope or confidence in the future. The prophet Isaiah speaks of God’s promises - a Servant who has been anointed with God’s Spirit and will come to bring justice. God assures us that justice will come—the Servant will not faint or grow weary.

In Jesus, what God has promised has come to be. Jesus comes to bring justice, and yet, it’s a radical plan. God’s justice will come not through harsh actions, but through a gentle spirit that brings peace. The Servant comes with a spirit of wisdom and understanding that is given by God. God undergirds what the Servant will do. And the response from all of creation is powerful—it’s a song of praise.

Jesus comes in a humble state, yet he comes for everyone so that the world might know God’s mercy and be thankful. Jesus comes so that all would know God and be reconciled to God. And in Matthew’s Gospel, John the Baptizer doesn’t understand why Jesus comes for baptism. But Jesus submits himself for baptism not because he needs to be forgiven for sin, but because he does God’s will.

John the Baptist reminds us to look around and see God’s vision - that we’d understand who we are and whose we are - and that our understanding would translate into everyday action. I am a child of God. You are a beloved child of God. What does that look like in our lives? How do we show that? It’s not an opportunity to boast, but

there's urgency to living out that identity - and pointing others to the Source of life - to Jesus - and to making sure that we're clear that God loves fully and unconditionally.

Ruth Duck says we are "water-washed and Spirit-born." We believe something happens here at the font. It's a beginning - not an end. It's a holy moment, and we've experienced them together. I often look around and remember baptizing children and adults in our congregation - and think about how God's grace is so real in their lives.

Jesus' baptism confirms an amazing part of the mystery of the Incarnation: that we're connected to God in a special way through him. He is beloved, and so are we. He participates in baptism - not because he needs forgiveness - but because he identifies with us in all of our humanity. He knows what it means to need God's affirmation and to hear the powerful, wonderful words of life.

And we need to hear them. I don't care who we are and how long we've claimed a relationship with God. We need to hear that we are loved, claimed, named, and cherished by our Creator. We need to know that every time we witness a baptism, we remember our own - and we have the opportunity to touch the water as a sign.

And we need to remember that baptism brings us together as the family of God. Each of us is beloved, and we must treat one another as such. Baptism affirms that promise of God's inclusive and incredible love for us.

One preacher wrote, "I do not always feel like a child of God. I do not always look like a child of God. God knows I do not always act like a child of God! But I am. I am one of God's children not because of what I did or because of who I am but because God chose me."

You received a stone today to remind you of who you are - a child of God. We traded them with each other and heard the words from others - you are a child of God. Today we have the opportunity to reaffirm our baptism. To be clear, this is not a re-baptism or repetition of baptism. It is a reaffirmation and a remembrance of God's loving action in baptism.

"Remember your baptism and be thankful." For some of us, it's easy to remember. It wasn't too long ago—we were baptized as adults, and we can recall the feeling of the water. We can recall God's presence in a new way through the power of the Holy Spirit.

For others of us, we cannot physically remember our baptism because we were baptized as infants. But, don't worry, God remembers your baptism. God was there just as God is here with us today. God calls us and claims us. We remember God's gift of grace to us. When we touch the water, we celebrate and give thanks because God is good—all the time.

For those who have not yet been baptized, touching the water is an opportunity to think about God's grace in your life and know that God loves you. Perhaps it's a time to anticipate your baptism and to consider what that might mean for you. You are a child of God...wonderful words of life.

Come to the water...and be thankful for God's grace.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE

I was there to hear your bawling cry,
I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized,
to see your life unfold.

These are the words that we will sing together as we prepare to celebrate baptism today. The song walks through the stages of life, and we remember God's grace today - gathered together in many stages of life, but all of us - beloved children of God, held in God's care, precious in God's sight, invited into relationship with God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, our God who is with us from the very beginning and goes with us to the end.