

“Here Is My Servant”

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Isaiah 42:1-9 Matthew 3:13-17

What happens when you watch a baptism? Have you ever seen or heard anything unusual ... some dramatic sign in the sky, a spiritual dove-like body appearing, or a booming voice coming from who-knows-where? The only thing that comes close that I can remember, is when we baptized little Sofie Seyun Hwang two and a half years ago. Do you remember that? It was the last week of August. When the service was over and we were greeting each other, suddenly we heard a deafening clap of thunder and the fire alarm started blasting. Everyone rushed out of the building and stood in the parking lot, while our local firefighters scurried around for over an hour, trying to figure out what happened and shut the alarm off, which had been wrecked by the lightning strike. It was a memorable event that put a quick end to the fellowship hour after church. But nothing unusual happened during the actual baptism.

When we baptize someone, he or she may have some kind of inner experience, and the rest of us may feel moved, but we don't usually see any metaphysical sights or hear any audible pronouncements from heaven. Are we missing something? Doing something wrong? What is supposed to happen at a baptism?

Even though our experience may not include everything Lisa read today, Matthew's story of Jesus' baptism does give us an idea as to what we might expect. Right before the part we heard, John the Baptist was in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance. And crowds of people made the trip out to the River Jordan, confessing their sins. That's often how people explain what happens in baptism: we receive forgiveness of sin and a clean start before God.

That may be part of it. But for Jesus, it was much more. Did Jesus have anything to confess? John said to Jesus, “I should be baptized by YOU, and you are coming to ME?” And when we baptize a baby, does a baby have anything to confess? Sure, you can say that all human beings are tainted by sin, simply by the fact that we are human. And Jesus was a human being. But Jesus' baptism was more about his identity. It was an affirmation of God's acceptance and love for him as a son. God pronounced “This is my Son, my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.”

Notice that Jesus hadn't done anything yet, except to show up at his own baptism. It would have been very different if he had already been healing the sick and preaching good news to the poor and outcast. Then we might think God was pleased because of all the good things he was doing, that somehow he did something to earn this blessing from God. But the blessing came first. God's love was the beginning and foundation of everything Jesus was to do in his ministry.

And so for us. God's grace and blessing in baptism is not because we have been good, or somehow done something to deserve it. God's love and forgiveness are a gift, and the beginning of all that we can do and be. Everything starts with love, as it says in I John (4:19), “We love, because God first loved us.” God's declaration to us, that we are beloved children and God is pleased with us, is the foundation we build on.

We need to keep reminding ourselves of that, because that message is often crowded out by negative messages that tell us we are not good enough. Henri Nouwen

wrote about his work with severely handicapped people: “Many of the people I live with hear voices that tell them they are no good, that they are a problem, that they are a burden, that they are a failure. They hear a voice that keeps saying, ‘If you want to be loved, you had better prove that you are worth loving...’”*

But we don’t have to have an obvious handicap to feel we are not worthy of love. Many of us are naturally insecure, and it’s only made worse by our competitive, consumer-driven culture that thrives on creating all sorts of anxieties to get us to buy more products. We start to believe that we have to change or improve ourselves in order to be accepted, that if only we would lose more weight, work out more, get a better job, or accomplish something important, then we would be worthy of love and respect.

But God gives us a different message in baptism. God tells us: you are my beloved child. I know you. I love you. I choose you. I was there when you were created, and watched you grow in your mother’s womb. I have taken you by the hand and kept you (Is. 42:6). God’s love is unconditional.

That’s why baptism is so important. It’s something we can see and feel to remind us these things are true. It reminds us of our true identity as beloved children of God, and that we deserve to be treated with respect and love. But since baptism only happens once for each of us, we need ways to remember it. Believe it. Keep it in our hearts.

So right after the sermon today, you will have an opportunity to remember your baptism. If you would like, you can come to the baptismal font while the congregation sings the next hymn. Soon Hee and I will stand at the font and one of us will sprinkle water on your head and say a blessing. This does not count as a real baptism; it’s simply a physical way to remember we are baptized and we are God’s beloved children. If you don’t wish to participate, just stay in your seat and join in the singing.

Now, one more thing happened to Jesus in his baptism. It says the heavens were opened and he received the Holy Spirit. And with that Spirit, Jesus had the power to begin his ministry of teaching and healing. In our baptisms we also receive the power of the Holy Spirit, the power to take part in what God is doing on the earth, to join in Christ’s ministry of love, peace and justice. Through the Holy Spirit, God’s power is in us, and God will use each one of us to change the world.

So after we renew our baptism vows this morning, we’re also going to ordain new people to serve as elders and deacons in the church. We have seen God’s hand at work in each of these people, and we recognize qualities in them that would make them good leaders. They said yes to the call, and are now offering themselves to God. And we pray for God’s power to work through them in their different roles in the church.

Everyone who is baptized receives the Holy Spirit and is anointed and empowered to serve. You may be called to teach or to sing in the choir. You may be called to take care of our building, to keep track of our finances, or participate in a mission project. You may be called to assist in worship, or simply to pray. And we are also called to serve outside the church. You may serve God through your job, your volunteer efforts, or your friendships and relationships. The point is to let God use who we are to show God’s love and justice in the world.

Jack read from the prophet Isaiah this morning, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights: I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” Some people believe Isaiah was writing a job description for Jesus. And certainly Jesus fulfilled what the prophet described. But it’s more likely Isaiah had in mind the whole nation of Israel when he described this servant. And today the work of God belongs to all of us as well, not just one special person. Each

one of us is a servant whom God chooses and upholds and delights in. And we are each given the power of the Holy Spirit to bring forth justice on the earth.

So I invite you to turn to the questions of faith in your bulletin. And if you wish, renew your baptismal vows by answering these questions:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

Let us pray:

O God, let your spirit move over this water, that it may be a reminder that we have been cleansed, raised to new life, and received as your beloved children. Help us to believe that message and keep it in our hearts. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, that we may have the power to do your will, to walk in your ways, and share the good news of your love with those who need to hear it most, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, mother of us all. Amen.

Please stay seated for the next hymn which is number 375, "Shall We Gather At the River?" And if you wish to come forward to remember your baptism, to remember that you are God's beloved child, please come down the center aisle and return to your seat by the side aisles. And may we be filled with the power of God's spirit to do God's will, and shine as lights in this world. Amen.

* Nouwen, Henri, "The Life of the Beloved," on 30 Good Minutes, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, May 17, 1991 at http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/nouwen_3502.htm