

“Come And See”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Matthew 3:13-17
John 1:29-42

During my first year of divinity school, I had the honor of taking a class with the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was a theologian in residence on campus at Emory University. Our reading load was intense; we learned the history of the political and religious blueprints of Apartheid in South Africa-- which was the practice of keeping white people and black Africans, as well as other people of color-- in a physical, economic and political separation. We learned about the different courageous resisters to the Apartheid system. We learned about the movement, as well as its dissenting voices-- that eventually toppled Apartheid. We heard several jaw-dropping, awe inspiring stories about the Archbishop himself. And through it all, the Arch-- as we affectionately called him-- wove his understandings of God and his theological assessment of humanity.

It sounds like heavy stuff, and it was. But my recollection of that class is that we often left in awe of what was said, and he often injected warmth and humor into what he taught, even through stories that caused collective sorrow and sighing as we were disturbed by the evils humans can create. Even still, Tutu had a faith that there is a goodness that God set in God's people that can't be lost. In the years since, several times I have looked back at the notebook I have saved from that semester so that I could refer to my notes, hoping to somehow recapture the wisdom that Tutu spoke about. Thank goodness I also have the articles from his class and his books, because for many of the lecture dates, I only have a few sentences written down. It's not because I wasn't paying close attention. It's because something would happen in the class that would cause me to put my pen down and simply take it all in. And in one date, I have-- written over and over again in my notebook, *You are God's beloved. You are God's beloved. You are God's beloved.* My classmates and I had agreed afterward: it had felt like we had literally just taken a bath in God's love. And that's the thing about Tutu's lectures-- he was an amazing storyteller, with a lifetime of witness to his reasons for believing in the goodness of humanity and our inherent belovedness-- even in the face of some of the most heinous people and atrocious actions. But somehow, though his stories were rich, he was able to convey all this in ways that transcended words. That's why I often didn't have many words written down at all from my lectures with him. It was something experienced, more than explained.

Baptism is like that. Words cannot completely describe the mystery of what it does to us. How it can bathe us in God's love, and not only that: change who we are and how we act moving forward. Invite us into a life of connection. Maybe this is why John described Jesus as the Word made flesh, dwelling among us. We need something more specific, more embraceable and touching, more drenching... than words. Words alone cannot portray the depths of God's love for us. But being immersed in the waters of baptism can show us something that perhaps our words alone cannot hold. These waters invite us to "come and see" what God's love can do.

When Jesus was baptized, God's spirit like a dove descended upon him, and a voice said, "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." I think that voice speaks for each of us in the particular moment of our baptism: You are my child, my beloved. In you I am well pleased."

To have a starting place of receiving the words that you are God's beloved is a good way to begin a spiritual journey. Knowing we are loved inspires goodness. It helps us to recognize the belovedness of each child of God. This love invites a relationship to love God back, with our actions and our lives. For me, having God's love as a starting point for a spiritual journey-- rather than a sense of utter unworthiness-- sets the trajectory (or direction) for how this collaboration with God will go. And while human love may be flawed and sometimes fail us, and we may fail at it, God's love is a love that will not let us go.

Another meaning I see in Jesus receiving baptism comes in the similar goals between Jesus, and John who baptized him. The mother of John-- Elizabeth-- and the mother of Jesus-- Mary-- were relatives, and when these two women met while pregnant with their sons, Elizabeth's womb leaped in recognition of Jesus' holiness. John was a prophet in Judea at a time when the Hebrew people were *primed* with expectation that God's liberation would break into their world. When John saw his cousin Jesus, who had come into his own publicly, at the waters of baptism, he knew that his work had been for the purpose of getting the people ready for Jesus' work. John and Jesus both preached a message that would ultimately cost them their lives. Water, which we see in scriptures as both giver and destroyer of life, is not always tame. So, when we choose to come to the font, or present our children to the font for baptism, we are embarking on a journey that could call us and our children to anything. Baptism does not protect us from suffering. Baptized or not, we will all see periods of struggle and of suffering. We will all experience death. But we can be certain of this: in baptism, God names us as God's son, God's daughter, God's beloved-- and that love continues no matter what storm or drought may find us. The waters will always carry us through. Sometimes those waters

show up in tears that drench our faces and flood our souls. But even that is irrigating our hearts and our lives, so that new life can grow.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. prophesied to the precious, beloved nature of all God's children. He taught us in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail that "Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly... injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." That conviction led King and those who boldly marched with him to endure the high pressure jets of fire hoses, as they fought for equality between the races and for economic justice. Some, including King, were hospitalized by the power of those fire hoses. But just as that water hospitalized, it also *baptized* society's understanding in transformative and remarkable ways. The televised news reports showing young activists attacked with firehoses and dogs created a moral turning point for many. And in one situation, in Birmingham, Alabama, when a crowd of over 1,000 students knelt in prayer before the Birmingham jail that housed Martin Luther King, the police commissioner commanded his men to turn on the firehoses on the youth and children. Nobody moved. The commissioner yelled at them, demanding that they follow his orders. Instead, the civil servants dropped their hoses. One fireman cried, saying "We can't continue to do this."¹

One of the ways that John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ's coming is that he prepared people to see what Jesus Christ would be doing. Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!" John preached a baptism that also involved a change of life. What Martin Luther King drew out of ordinary people who may have passively acquiesced to day to day, systemic racism, was a spirit of repentance. When people saw things like firehoses turned onto children, or police dogs attacking students, they were drawn into a spirit of repentance and conversion. James Baldwin wrote, "the truth can be quickly received, or received at all, only by the sinner who knows and admits that he is guilty of having sinned much. Stated another way: only guilt admitted accepts truth."

We did not do it this Sunday, but most Sundays, our church service includes a prayer of confession. It's a chance for us to examine truth, and see whether we are in line with it—and if not, to commit to make the changes that repentance requires.

Jesus' first recorded words in public, according to Matthew's gospel, were these: "What are you looking for?" He asked that to two of John's disciples, who saw Jesus and recognized him as the Lamb of God, and started to follow him. The disciples then ask Jesus where he is staying, and he says, "Come and see." But Jesus did not only show them where he was staying. He invited them into his day. What did he do with them that day? Go fishing? Teach and preach? Heal and cast out demons? Stop the stoning of a woman? We don't really know, but whatever

¹ Stan Duncan, "Hold Fast to the Dream" and Jonathan Reider, *Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King Jr's Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle that Changed a Nation* p. 120

happened on that day they spent with Jesus changed their lives forever; they became his disciples and continued his witness beyond his death.

Our baptism invites us to come and see: to see what Jesus is doing in the world and through us. Not only that, but to see the experiences of those whose experiences are outside of our own. To ask those outside the realm of our experience, “What are you looking for?” rather than assume that we know best for them. I still remember one day when Archbishop Tutu was teaching about the need for full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the church. My friend Erik raised his hand, and asked a question about scripture. “Now Erik, imagine *you* were gay...” Tutu began— to which the whole class chuckled, because Erik was pretty certainly the gayest person in the room, and everyone knew it— it took no imagination at all. And then, Tutu continued to give a queer interpretation of scriptures that had formerly been used to clobber people who are gay or lesbian. I was tremendously moved. Here was a man who was married to a woman, and who had been imprisoned for his work protesting systemic racism in South Africa. It would have been more than enough to help lead a country from Apartheid to freedom. It would have been enough to help to frame a process that would seek truth and reconciliation in his country after Apartheid was overthrown, which he had done. And yet, he took his own experience of being oppressed and longing for freedom, and then identified with other marginalized groups that have that same yearning— whether for women, or for LGBTQ people. Not only that; he took courageous stands for the rights and justice of these people and groups, rather than just for the rights that impacted him. That is something baptism does. The waters draw us out of our individual experience, to be bound to all of God’s children.

We are God’s beloved, and while God’s love is a gift that cannot be earned, it is also a gift that asks huge responsibility from us. There is no telling where the waters of baptism may lead each of us, but have courage, beloved ones, and come and see. We can count on God to take our hand while leading us there.