

Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’

Sermon – Jan 10, 2021 – St James – The Baptism of the Lord

Jesus’ Baptism, which we celebrate today, is another very important Epiphany or revelation. In fact, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, this feast, the Baptism of Jesus, is celebrated as the main Epiphany event. Jesus joins the crowd, receiving baptism for the forgiveness of sins when he has no sin. This is a dramatic show of solidarity – Our Lord with us. From the open heavens, the Divine voice affirms Jesus as the beloved son and the Spirit dove descends on our Lord.

Celebrating Jesus’ baptism today...is an opportunity for us to consider our own baptisms. Yes, most of us have been baptized. As the baptized, who does it make you and us? At baptism the priest says ‘I sign you with a cross (making a cross on the forehead) and mark you as Christ’s own forever. Yes! Marked as Christ’s own forever. In the Anglican church and others, we take care never to baptize more than once. If someone comes along wishing baptism and is not sure whether they’ve been baptized, we make a special provision. We say ‘If you are not already baptized, I baptize you.’ because baptism is done once and once only. It lasts forever.

If you are not baptized and would like to be, it can easily be arranged! I discovered this recently - my baptismal certificate! Here it is...very old of course...but something tangible which states that on the 8th day of May 1949, I was baptized. It is especially precious to me because it was lost for years. Do you have any baptismal reminders today? A candle perhaps? A gown? A photo?

I would like to tell you Fayette’s Baptism Story told by Janet Wolf who used to serve as the pastor of Hobson United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Hobson UMC is a wildly diverse congregation that includes, as she describes it, “...people with power and PhDs and folks who have never gone past the third grade; folks with two houses and folks living on the streets; and, as one person who struggles with mental health declared, ‘those of us who are crazy and those who think they’re not.’”

Years ago, a woman named Fayette found her way to Hobson. Fayette lived with mental illness and lupus and without a home.

Imagine...without a home. But she joined the new member class and the conversation about Baptism. Janet, the pastor said baptism is “this holy moment when we are named by God’s grace with such power it won’t come undone,” This especially grabbed Fayette’s imagination. During the class, Fayette would ask again and again, “And when I’m baptized, I am...?” “The class learned to respond,

‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’

‘Oh, yes!’ she’d say, and then we could go back to our discussion.”

The day of Fayette’s baptism came.

Fayette went under, came up spluttering, and cried, ‘And now I am...?’

And we all sang,

‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’

‘Oh, yes!’ she shouted as she danced all around the fellowship hall.

Two months later, Janet the pastor received a phone call.

Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital. So Janet went. She could see her from a distance, pacing back and forth.

When she got to the door, she heard, ‘I am beloved....’ She turned, saw Janet, and said, ‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and....’ Catching sight of herself in the mirror—hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn, dirty, and rebuttoned askew, she started again, ‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and...’ She looked in the mirror again and declared, ‘...and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I’ll be so beautiful I’ll take your breath away!’

Beloved, the voice from heaven proclaimed as the baptismal waters of the Jordan rolled off Jesus’ body. Fayette—beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold—haunts us with her story. She challenges us to realize that we too are

‘beloved, precious children of God, and beautiful to behold.’

We carry that identity. Can we really let that sink in? that we are beloved, precious children of God, beautiful to behold? Can we live really believing it, really claiming it as who we are? Can we see that others are also beloved precious children of God and treat them that way?

That is our homework today...to sit down for even a minute with the knowledge that I and you and we are

‘beloved, precious children of God, and beautiful to behold’?

Wherever we may go and whatever we may do or have done to us, God continues to love us, accept us, and hold onto us.

“You are beloved, and precious, and beautiful to behold.” This doesn’t mean that we escape the pain and suffering of life. But it does mean that unshakable love is forever with us to see us through the hard times. Janet Wolf, pastor of Hobson United Methodist Church in Nashville, says that baptism is “This holy moment when we are named by God’s grace with such power it won’t come undone.”

We live in grace and love that won’t come undone. Amen.