

The Water and the Word

Preached FCCW January 13, 2019

Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:21-22

In the American South, prior to the Civil War, slaves enjoyed few of the same privileges as their white owners. One of the rare exceptions was the freedom to attend church. But, white slave owners made sure that the only sermons preached to black congregations came from those Bible passages that encouraged slaves to obey their masters and accept their lot in life.

On Sunday mornings slaves filled the pews in the churches of their white overseers. But under cover of darkness, their true worship happened in places called “hush harbors.”

Hush harbors were located in fields and swamps and woods where quilts hung in the trees formed makeshift walls that masked the sights and sounds of their gatherings from nearby slave-owners. There were no pews or organs, and the only pulpits were tree stumps. But the Bible passages preached there were about the captives being set free, like the passage we just read from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

Frequently, the preacher would stand over a tub of water to preach. Nobody seems to know for certain whether the tub of water was intended to amplify the preacher’s voice for his congregation, or whether it was meant to muffle it to keep them from being discovered. But one thing we can be sure about: there must have been a lot of powerful words preached over that water. Words that fell from preachers’ lips to sink down to the bottom of those tubs. Words like grace and salvation, like redemption and deliverance, words like hope and freedom.

Words, in other words, that these slaves would never hear, except as they were spoken over those waters. These were words that held the power to disarm all the degrading things spoken and done to them in the light of day. And you can almost imagine that whenever those words that were spoken into that tub of water inspired some wretched soul to step forward to be baptized, and when the preacher reached down and scooped that water up in his hands and then poured it over the head of that brother or sister, well it might as well have been all those good words from that tub that washed over them, along with the water.

There were good words spoken over the waters of the Jordan River on that day when Jesus came to be baptized. Words that tumbled out of heaven through a split open sky. Words that fluttered to earth like a dove settling on a branch, to fall at last upon Jesus as he rose from the waters.

These words “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

Beloved is one of those words that doesn't come up in our daily conversations too often. Yet, for that very reason, when we do hear it, it grabs our attention, because it is a word that tells us that who or what it is describing must be very, very special. Even the sound of the word to our ears, or the feel of it as it rolls off of your tongue, is pleasing.

Beloved.

It is not a word that is even very common in the Bible. In fact, throughout all four gospels, the Greek word translated as beloved only appears in reference to Jesus, or in reference to a character in a parable that is clearly meant to represent Jesus. It's as though the gospel writers reserved “beloved” as a special term to describe the unique relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father.

And yet, when you look outside the gospels, you find that in the rest of the New Testament, the word “Beloved” appears fairly frequently. Only there, it is never, ever used to describe Jesus. Instead, it always refers to Jesus' followers – to Christians. It's as if the Word that Jesus received at his baptism gets passed onto us in our baptisms.

That word – beloved - spoken into the water of the Jordan, has been carried downstream through the waters of all the countless baptisms since then, so that every man woman and child from then on has been baptized not only with water, but with the affirmation of their own belovedness in God's sight.

Baptism is the marker that we always have and can always turn to in order to be reminded, that the deepest of all human hungers, which is the longing to be beloved in the eyes of someone or something, has been satisfied once and for all.

It is that quest for an experience of belovedness that is at the heart of most everything noble and everything regrettable that people do. Scratch the surface of the pursuit of things like wealth, fame or power, and you find that deeper desire to be loved and accepted. But baptism is where our eyes are opened to the only love that can truly fill the human soul.

Martin Luther (the German monk who started the Protestant Reformation), when he was troubled by self-doubt or despair, would repeat to himself, "I am baptized, I am baptized," to remind himself of his true worth.

Whenever I hear that story about Luther I can't help but think of the late comedian Chris Farley. When Chris was part of the cast of Saturday Night Live he played a bumbling, insecure reporter whose assignments often involved interviewing big celebrities. He would be so intimidated by the people he interviewed that he inevitably asked some foolish question, then would slap himself in the forehead and tell himself he was "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

I wonder if sometimes we don't go through life like that.

Despite our best attempts to be a person worthy of being beloved, our imperfections keep getting exposed. Then we beat ourselves up and call ourselves names like, "Failure, failure, failure." Or, "Loser, loser, loser."

What difference might it make for your life, to live instead in the awareness that you are God's beloved, beloved, beloved?

What false beliefs about yourself keep you trying so hard to be what you are convinced you should be, that they are preventing you from being everything God intends for you to be?

When those slaves who gathered in hush harbors heard that they were beloved, they believed it, no matter what they were called or how they were treated, and that gave them their first taste of freedom.

One explanation of baptism is that it is a visible symbol of an invisible reality. The invisible reality in your baptism is this: that God's soul delights in you with the same pleasure that God expressed for his only begotten Son at the Jordan River.

But even though God accepts us just as we are, God also loves us too much to leave us as we are. C. S. Lewis said we don't believe God will love us because we are good, but that God makes us good because God loves us.

That is why baptism is not only a claim, but a calling. If our baptism marks us as God's beloved sons and daughters, just as it identified Jesus as God's beloved Son, it also calls us, as it summoned him, to a life of service.

Jesus' baptism signaled the start of his public ministry. When he left the Jordan he went to Galilee where he taught, and healed and worked to bring justice and restore dignity to all people. And our baptism is like our ordination to ministry in Jesus' name. We are commissioned to do the same sort of things as he did. The Word that has come down to us in the waters of our baptism is intended to echo through us to touch the life of the world. It is not a "one and done" event but a gateway to a new identity and a transformed life. The meditation by the great Reformer Martin Luther that is printed on the front of your bulletin says, "A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued."

In a few moments we will sing the "Hymn, Child of Blessing, Child of Promise." It's a hymn that is often sung at baptisms, and it is filled with good words sung over the water of the baptismal font. Words that are usually sung as though intended for the baby who is being baptized.

Today I invite you to sing those words with someone else in mind.

Yourself.

Sing then as an expression of what God has spoken about you over the waters of your baptism.

You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter. With you I am well pleased."

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