

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22, Acts 8:14-17

Sermon Resources:

<http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.com/2015/12/year-c-baptism-of-lord-january-10-2016.html>

<http://kcmlection.blogspot.com/2007/01/jesus-baptism-c2.html>

Interpreter's Bible Commentary, "Luke/John"

[https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2047-choosing-epiphany?](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2047-choosing-epiphany?fbclid=IwAR3PYn47Jvx6V_koW5laILDHeKkUhaC6UjSyTjCCh1VL9uE39dFSFjAMDz4)

[fbclid=IwAR3PYn47Jvx6V\\_koW5laILDHeKkUhaC6UjSyTjCCh1VL9uE39dFSFjAMDz4](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2047-choosing-epiphany?fbclid=IwAR3PYn47Jvx6V_koW5laILDHeKkUhaC6UjSyTjCCh1VL9uE39dFSFjAMDz4)

My mother, and now I, follow the housekeeping advice of a woman who calls herself "The Fly Lady", and in my parents' house, taped to a cabinet, is one of the Fly Lady's axioms: "You are not behind. I don't want you to try and catch up. I just want you to jump in where we are, ok?". You are not behind. You do not have to catch up.

That sentiment, surprising as it may seem, can be applied to Jesus' baptism: You do not have to catch up.

Our Luke passage tells us that John is already baptizing in the Jordan river, and scores of people were coming to him. What it also tell us is that the people were in expectation, expectation of a Messiah, and understandably, they wondered if that Messiah was John, which is why he has to clarify that the Messiah is still to come. But the passage says they were in expectation. And it's worth considering that word for a moment, because in our times, we have kind of laid... expectations...on the word expectation. It has a little bit of a negative connotation to it, now, "these are the expectations", "I expect more of you", "I set high expectations, see if you can reach them". There's a little bit of a defensive posture

to expectation, now, an adversarial attitude that says “I’m gonna set this bar really really high and see either if you rise to the challenge, or you fail me and my expectations”.

The word here, expectation, isn’t exactly that. It basically, in Greek, just means to watch, to watch for something, to look for something. It’s more like excitement, or suspense, or being sure that something is coming and watching for it. It’s like knowing that someone’s coming to visit and watching for their car in the driveway. Expectation in the biblical sense, is something you’re sure to see, absolutely going to experience, definitely going to encounter. It’s an attitude of excitement, a posture of hope and willingness to see. John looks like a Messiah, because the people are expecting a Messiah, and even though he’s not, their expectations are still fulfilled when Jesus comes along.

But it is kind of surprising, even with their expectation of a Messiah, for this amazing event to happen here. In the wilderness, in the Jordan river that was just part of the landscape, part of the geography of their lives. This water is just everyday river water. This place is just an ordinary, kind of desolate place. It’s not a temple or church, it’s not happening at some pre-approved moment, it’s not following some exact checklist. It’s happening at a river they all know, it’s happening in a wilderness, it’s happening to a person who comes out from among them, with a body just like theirs, but they expected a Messiah, and so here he is, with God’s voice thundering over him.

Our Psalm told us that God’s glory thunders over water and wilderness and forest, over the natural elements of this world, and this is true in our baptism story. God’s glory, God’s voice, thunders over the Jordan river, over this wilderness, over a seemingly ordinary man. God’s glory appears as the Holy Spirit, as a dove, God’s glory thunders out the truth: This is my beloved.

What's remarkable in a world where we have high expectations, expectations which become burdens, where we have to prove our worth, prove our value, be productive and visible in our success, is that Jesus is called beloved, before he does anything. He has not healed anyone, taught anything, he has not died on a cross, he has not risen from a tomb. At this point in the gospel of Luke he hasn't done anything noteworthy. He hasn't proved that he's the Messiah yet. But God says this is my beloved, before anything else. He doesn't need to catch up. He doesn't need to prove or produce. He doesn't need to meet a mark before he can be loved. He is God's beloved, precious and honored, as it said in Isaiah, in God's eyes, before he does anything.

And it's only then that his ministry begins. The beloved identity starts his ministry. He carries that identity, the knowledge that he is already loved, into his temptation with satan, into his calling disciples, into his teaching, preaching, healing, into his obedience and hurt and dying. He is beloved, and that's where the ministry begins.

And part of his ministry was to make disciples, whom we hear about in our Acts passage. By the time the events of Acts come along, the disciples already have their identity. They were called by Jesus, or by his commissioned disciples, to follow him. And he called them long before they did anything noteworthy or productive. They were called to be disciples first, out of his love, and then their ministry started.

They, too, are filled with expectation, biblical expectation, with hope, with certainty, they are looking and watching for any signs, any good news, sure that it will come. So when they hear that there is interest in the way of Jesus Christ, there is a community gathering in Samaria, they go there. And for reasons not explained to us, the baptism there was in Jesus' name, but the Holy Spirit has not yet come. So these disciples, the beloved ones of Jesus Christ, pass the Holy Spirit onto the

Samaritans, so they too can know God's glory, here in their town, so they, too, can be known as God's beloved. This is part of the disciples' ministry: to pass this on, to share glory and holiness, to reveal the belovedness of these people. And now, the Samaritan ministry can go on from there.

When we talk about baptism today, there is a lot of confusion over it, and in our confusion and fear and uncertainty we tend to pile on more restrictions and regulations than may be necessary and which seem to demand of baptism a systematic process that doesn't really fit. So baptism becomes yet another example of our kind of expectations, the kind of expectations that are burdens, that are adversarial and defensive, the kind of expectations that say "meet the mark first, and then we'll assess".

And then we apply that same thinking to ourselves, our own baptism. We place high expectations, burdens and demands, we expect failure or productivity, we want proof and worthiness first. We think we need to catch up, and make sure everyone else has caught up, too.

But, we don't. The story of baptism is that you do not have to catch up. The miracle of baptism is that you do not have to catch up. It starts where we are, who we are, and calls us beloved, right now, so our work can begin.

The miraculous story of baptism is that when we baptize someone, when we are baptized, when we see it happen, is that God's glory thunders over even these waters, here, in this bowl, here in Natchitoches, God's glory thunders over this place, over our lives. And not once we've caught up and met burdensome kinds of expectations. It happen now. At this moment, in these pews, we are already precious in God's eyes. At this moment, in our lives, holiness is already in us. God's glory thunders over the water and the blood running through our veins at this very moment, in this place, at this time. Baptism shows us that the Holy Spirit

comes here, of all places, to us, of all people, as a sign of God's love. Baptism says you don't have to catch up, you are my beloved, right here, right now.

Baptism reveals that we are loved. That's the expectation we should have of baptism. That's the identity we draw from baptism. To be baptized is to reveal that we are already loved. That's what we watch for, and wait for, that's what we expect. Baptism isn't supposed to be the source of expectations that people fail to meet, baptism isn't supposed to be an impossible bar or an endlessly moving target, baptism isn't supposed to require high markers and say "only then are you beloved". We don't say "let's see how you come through the fire and the flood and then decide". We look for and we expect and we watch for God's glory, God's holy Spirit, the beloved identity right here and now.

And then our work and our ministry come from that. From knowing that we are loved, from knowing that God's glory and Spirit will carry us through flood and fire and difficult times. Our work starts from what is true of us already, even before we do anything. Our ministry comes from the expectation that we are already beloved, already precious in God's eyes. Our ministry and our work are not a way to catch up and earn that identity, they spring from that identity.

We don't have to catch up. Yes, there is work to do. For our new elders, and the whole session, for our church, in our world, in our personal lives, there is work to do, no question. But we don't have to catch up, or prove something first, or meet a mark. We are doing the work of the session, of the church, of our lives as already beloved people. We are revealed by the Holy Spirit, by God's call, as loved, right now, where we are, in this place. You don't have to catch up, you are already loved. The work starts from there.

And that's what we expect in the world, too, that's what we expect of other people. We don't expect them to meet impossible standards, or to fail us, to prove

themselves worthy, or catch up, first. We expect love and glory and holiness, wherever they are.

And that's what we pass on, that's the makeup of our ministry, our work here on earth. Our work is to pass on the Holy Spirit, to ascribe glory to God in even the most surprising places, to reveal the belovedness of other people. We share what we already know, the identity we already carry, with other people.

A common question, and a question I have used in ministry, so not a bad question at all, is "What would you do, if you knew you could not fail?". A good question, certainly something to ponder. But a better question, I think, for we who are still sinful people, even in our baptism, as people who will fail, is: what will you do, knowing you are already beloved? What would you pass on to other people, if you knew for sure you were loved, if you wanted to reveal how precious and beloved they are in God's eyes? What would you let go of so that you could live in that identity, so you could share that with other people? What would you stop withholding, if you knew you were beloved of God? What would you look for and expect in this world and of other people, knowing you are beloved?

We are baptized, with water, with Spirit, and we do not have catch up, we are already precious in God's sight, we are already loved. So our ministry is not to set up impossible standards or exactly right protocols, our ministry is to share the holy spirit, the sign of love, to help reveal how loved other people are, to reveal in them a love which will carry them through flood and flame.

Let's not set impossible standards, let's not expect in a way that is burdensome and defensive. Let's expect God's glory and spirit and love, and let's expect them here, in this place, here, in our lives, here, in the people around us. Let's remember that we are God's beloved. Let's remember that we don't have to catch up, we are already loved. Let's be baptized into that expectation, or remember that we are baptized in that. Let's do our work from that identity. Let's

expect to see love and hope and God's Spirit in the world. Let's pass on God's Spirit, let's ascribe to God glory in every place, and let's remember for ourselves, and reveal in each other, that we are God's beloved children. Amen.