

Isaiah 43:1-7  
Psalm 29  
Acts 8:14-17  
Luke 3:15-17, 21,22

Epiphany 1C  
St Thomas, Medina  
January 10, 2016  
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### Already Beloved

Have you ever wondered why we go directly from Christmas, the incarnation, the birth of the baby boy who was known by shepherds and wise-men alike to be the newborn king, the savior of the world... have you ever wondered why we skip the next thirty years of Jesus' life, and go straight from birth to adult baptism? Unlike little Robby, whom we will baptize later this morning, Jesus was a fully grown man at his baptism, and we don't know much about the things that brought him to the river Jordan that day. We knew at his birth that he was precious, special, touched by God, beloved of God, the Son of God. And while we don't know why his young life wasn't documented, what seems to be most important to the gospel writers, and particularly to Luke, is that the first time we encounter Jesus after his birth, it's at his baptism. And at his baptism, just the same as your baptism or mine, he was sealed by the Holy Spirit, and told in no uncertain terms that he was the beloved of God. *"You are my son, the beloved. ..."* At his baptism, Jesus experienced God's absolutely boundless and unqualified love.

Now we might tend to think that Jesus was God's only child, so he got more of God's love than anyone else. But as St Paul so often reminds us, we are all God's children by adoption and grace. We are all God's beloved. When we fully human humans are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, God offers us that same absolute, boundless and unqualified love. *"You are my son. You are my daughter. I love you and you are my heart's delight."* God has been speaking these words since the beginning of time. When the heavens opened up and Jesus heard them, he was hearing the same words God spoke to Israel through the prophet Isaiah. *"You are precious in my sight, and honored, I love you and you are mine."*

Is that what you think about when you think about baptism?

Some people think about baptism as a sort of "get-out-of-hell-free" card, a guarantee that a beloved child will be washed clean of her sins and assured a spot in heaven. For those folks, baptism is mostly about being baptized "out of" something like sin and darkness or even eternal damnation. But that's a funny thing to think about when a baby is being baptized... after all, how much trouble can a baby get into, anyway? So while baptizing "out of" something isn't enough of the story for me, it does get at something very important, and it helps us to understand the baptism of repentance John offered at the river Jordan. It helps us to understand why Jesus got in line with all those sinners to receive John's baptism of repentance when, like those little babies we baptize, he personally had nothing to repent of.

There are those who say that Jesus got in line with all those sin-sick sinners so that they would know he was one of them, because he wanted to show his solidarity with the people in his midst. But Jesus was born into a world not unlike our own – a world where privilege, isolation, selfishness, corruption and greed are built into societal structures that systematically glorify some and throw away others. I think Jesus lined up with all those other very human humans to receive John's baptism of repentance because he was really, truly a part of the very real human

experience of his time. I don't think he showed up merely for solidarity's sake, so he could be God in the midst of the guys. When Jesus came right along with all those other people to be baptized in the river Jordan, he was taking his place right smack in the middle of the human condition, just as he did at his birth, and just as he would at his death. Fully human, Jesus chose not to play the "God card," not to exclude himself from unjust cultural systems that were by their very nature, sinful. It wasn't that Jesus had committed individual sin, he had not... neither have the babies we baptize. In our baptismal promises, it isn't only individual sins of commission or omission that we repent of. With our baptismal promises, we also turn away from the systemic sin that is the collective human waywardness we are all born in to.

While all that helps to make sense of John's baptism of repentance, I still tend to think about baptism more as a turning toward something, than turning away, of taking in and being taken in. In this place, baptism is more about being welcomed into a community of unspeakable grace rather than it is about moving out of a state of sin. It's why we don't usually do baptisms in private ceremonies. It's why we are sad when people bring their babies to be baptized and don't ever come back. Baptism belongs in community because it is about community. Jesus' baptism happened in community nearly 2,000 years ago, just as Robby's will today, because when we are baptized into Christian community, we become part of a whole new world. It's a world that helps us to grow into our lives in Christ, a world where we look out for one another, a world where we share each other's joys and sorrows, a world where God's love and grace permeate everything. This is the world where we know ourselves to be beloved – beloved of God and of each other. Not because of who we are or what we've done or even because of how we live. We know ourselves to be beloved because of whose we are. *I have called you by name and you are mine. You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased.* These are the words Jesus heard the moment he emerged from the waters of baptism, long before he turned water into wine, before he healed blind men and hemorrhaging women, before he sat down to dinner with outcasts and sinners, before he cast out the first demon, before he raised Lazarus from the dead. He was God's own beloved before any of that, and in him God was well pleased. It's true for us too, you know. We were God's own beloved before we made varsity, before we got into a good college, before we bought a house, had a beautiful baby, before we gave away lots of money, visited sick neighbors, worked at the foodbank or homeless shelter, before we got the great job or the raise or the gold watch. Just as God was well pleased with his beloved son Jesus before Jesus had done the work he'd been given to do, God is well pleased with us too. Right here. Right now.

We too are God's own beloved, and in our baptisms, God is well pleased.

I don't believe the reason for God's good pleasure is simply that we came to church and got sprinkled or dunked or bathed in holy water. I don't even think it's because we made those beautiful baptismal promises. I believe God's heart overflows with joy at each and every baptism because in our baptisms, we are welcomed into the living, breathing, life changing, world changing Body of Christ. When we are baptized, we throw ourselves into the water with everybody else, and we find that we are no longer alone, no longer living in fear of not getting it right, no longer doomed to life that isn't life-giving. We are already beloved. Just like Jesus, you and I were beloved before one good deed got done. I actually believe our belovedness is the very reason any good does get done. It is our belovedness that equips us for God's work in the world. Jesus' baptism was the inauguration of his earthly ministry, just as our baptisms begin our

ministries in the world. For us, just as for Jesus, baptism is a beginning, not an end. The fact that we are honored and precious and beloved before we DO ANYTHING tells us what matters. Having been sealed by the Holy Spirit in God's love, we have everything we need to go out into the world offering justice and peace and forgiveness and hope and love, and all of it without worrying about how it's going to go, or how well we'll be thought of at the end of the day. We are already beloved. God is already well pleased.

In a few minutes, we will baptize Robert Nathan Rosnow. Listen carefully. Answer truthfully. Let yourself be changed by this wonderful thing God is doing right here, in this place, not just with Robby, but with us all. Know yourselves to be God's own beloved without whom none of it could happen in quite this beautiful and glorious way. Amen.

10:15

In a few minutes, we will have the opportunity to reflect on our baptisms as we renew our baptismal vows. Listen carefully. Answer truthfully. Let yourself be changed by this wonderful thing God is doing right here, in this place. And know yourselves to be the beloved without whom none of it could happen in quite this beautiful and glorious way. Amen.