

To be Beloved

Baptism of the Lord – 10 January 2021

How many of you have been baptised? How many of you remember your baptism? There is an ancient photograph of me taken in 1968 where I am in my father's arms in front of the font at St. Paul's Cathedral in London Ontario. I was born in November 1967 and baptised in May 1968. My mother was HORRIFIED that I was that old. And that is the subject of another sermon.

Jesus was baptised at what we believe was 30 years of age. He was baptised by his cousin John in the river Jordan. We hear the account of his baptism, this year, from Mark. Mark's gospel is the oldest of the gospels, and is believed to be the first. He doesn't include the nativity in his gospel, he cuts straight to Jesus as an adult. This happens in the first chapter, at the fourth verse. The first chapter of Mark's gospel introduces John first, and then goes to Jesus baptism. Why?

It was believed in the Hebrew Bible, that the Messiah would come, only after being announced by Elijah. There is some scholarship that believes John the Baptist IS the prophet Elijah, and thus, Jesus is the Messiah.

Regardless, today's reading is a veritable spectacle, especially verses 10 and 11, "And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" (Mark 4.10,11, NRSV)

This itinerant preacher Jesus, from Nazareth, is taken by his weird cousin John, and dunked in the river. As he comes back up out of the water, Jesus looks up as the heavens part, and sees the Spirit of God descending like a dove. Do the others present see the dove? We aren't told that. Do the other's present see the heavens parting? Or "torn apart" as described in the gospel? We aren't told that either. Mark's gospel is an economy of words.

Today's gospel reading, ends with the baptism, just three verses. Immediately following today's reading, the Spirit, which has just descended, drives Jesus into the wilderness for forty days of temptation.

Can you imagine? No time for celebration, no time for a party, or even a special candle.

That disconnected speed is how the world feels right now.

Jesus hears the voice of God say "'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" Again, we don't know if the crowd, as described in verse five "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." (Mark 1.5, NRSV) were present when any of this happened. Mark simply doesn't say. He's more interested in stating the facts, then he is in providing commentary.

Could it be, that God was addressing only Jesus, and as such only Jesus needed to hear

those words? By contrast, when Jesus is transfigured on the Mountaintop with Peter, James and John, they hear "THIS IS MY SON" as opposed to "You are my Son." One thing that remains the same, though, is the word Beloved.

At Jesus' Baptism, he hears You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.

At Jesus' Transfiguration he hears, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." (Mark 9.7, NRSV) At Jesus' Transfiguration, the crowd was present and intended to hear the words of God. At Jesus' Baptism the words were intended only for him.

Has anyone hear ever been called Beloved?

When I love someone, that is the term of endearment I use for them. My Beloved.

The definition of Beloved is "one who is dearly loved, or a much loved person." (www.dictionary.com) In other words, someone who is Beloved, is held in the highest of esteem. God so loved Jesus that when he was baptised, he was called Beloved.

I believe when all people are baptised they, too, become God's beloved. Every one of us, when we draw our first breath, receive the Spirit of God. The same spirit that began the process of creation. The same spirit that landed in the form of a dove, on Jesus at his baptism. Every one of us is loved by God from the moment of our birth, if not before, and when we are baptised, we become God's beloved.

I wish, oh how I wish, that my sermon could be only the good news today. But given what happened in the United States on Wednesday, I cannot ignore that atrocity. Please bear with me. I watched the news media on Wednesday, late afternoon, in horror as I saw White Nationalist Domestic Terrorists scaling the walls of the exterior stairway that lead to the Capitol building. They walked past the horrifically unprepared Capitol police and guards and basically walked into the Capitol building, attempting to overthrow the Senate and House of Representatives which were sitting.

They were not, as some media outlets reported "protesters". They were not intending to merely disrupt proceedings; they were prepared to overthrow the Senate and House, using force if necessary. They did not breach and intimidate the security, to simply "sit in" and air their grievances, demanding a recount.

No, they skipped and strolled through the building as though they had gate-crashed a frat party, and were looking for the closest keg. They wore red baseball caps; red, white and blue merchandise from their leader and carried Confederate flags. Because they are mostly all anti-maskers and COVID-19 deniers, their faces were uncovered, which should make them easier to identify and arrest.

They took selfies with statues, and of themselves, inside the Speaker of the House's office, feet propped up on the desk. They left threatening and disrespectful notes and took things that did not belong to them, often posing for a photo with their "trophies". Yet, because they were white, they were called protesters.

Had they been men and women of colour, there likely would have been a sea of dead and injured bodies on the steps of the Capitol building, had they first been able to cross the human barricade of heavily armed guards, as were seen at several peaceful Black Lives Matter protests over the summer of 2020.

I watched with morbid curiosity, then with increasing shock, disbelief and anger. I am angry, no, I'm furious and disappointed that they were able to gain entry as easily as they did. There were far too few guards on duty. It took the National Guard coming in many hours later, and a curfew from the city, to call them back and to go home. Let's not forget their leader released a video in which he said "so, go home, we love you and you're very special." (quote from a one-minute video, which has since been deleted.)

When I consider the less than ideal November and December that I have lived through, it doesn't really make sense that I am so emotionally impacted by this, yet I am. I'm usually all about perspective, when it comes to these things.

On Friday I met with two separate families at Cherished Memories to make plans for funerals. Mabel Anselmo died on the 7th of January, and her funeral is to be on Wednesday the 13th at 11:30 am at Cherished Memories. Babe is the sister of Daniel Bendicson, and Auntie of Danna Burgess. Gisela Lutzke also died on the 7th of January and her funeral will be on Thursday the 14th at 1:00 pm at Cherished Memories. Gisela is the sister-in-law of Herman Lutzke. May Mabel and Gisela rest in peace, their memory's always be a blessing.

Yesterday I received a phone call from my Spiritual Director, Sue McCullough. Her husband Dave suffered a massive brain bleed and is in a coma in Owen Sound Hospital. He will not survive this bleed and she is now waiting for him to die. I was able to say my goodbyes to him by phone, and although he is in a coma, I do believe he could hear me. Dave had incredible insights to the workings of the Anglican Church and he and I would often discuss his insights. Some of which I agreed, and some of which I did not understand. Our conversations were lively and always respectful. I will miss his baritone singing voice and his gentle demeanour. I ask for your prayers for Sue and her family as they wait, remember and mourn.

When I consider the devastation in the world, and the horror that is happening in another country, yet so close to home, I shake with rage and frustration. It got to the point I had to turn off the media newsfeeds and the radio and go for a walk. Why is this happening? Why can't those in charge see that all this is about fear?

In response to the mayhem unfolding on Wednesday, our Regional President, the Reverend Blair Odney penned the following letter to us in the Pacific Mountain Region.

Dear Friends,

As if COVID19 has not been enough to bring us to our knees, calling us to the best of ourselves, we now watch our neighbours and friends to the south live into the reality of political insurrection, prompted to violence by human brokenness and need. And it could get worse. We have no control over any of what happens in the United States; we do

have control over how we experience it. And I invite us all into the experience of prayer. I invite us all to hold all those in our world suffering under the abuse of political power with loving tenderness.

And please, do not be afraid. When we act in fear, we give ourselves over to the perils of humanity's worst behaviour. Our only response is love. Our only response is to invoke God's agency in a manner consistent with our faith.

He included this poem:

"There are only two feelings, Love and Fear
There are only two languages, Love and Fear
There are only two activities, Love and Fear
There are only two motives, two procedures,
two frameworks, two results.

Love and Fear.

Love and Fear."

(Michael Leunig, Common Prayer Collection, 1993)

We hold the choice in our hands and we are empowered by the Spirit that transforms. May love be your response. May love be your words. May love be your silence. May love hold your boundaries. May love ignite your joy.

In Christ,
Blair

For those of you who are in the place of dismay or frustration or anger, in which I am, may be heed the words of Blair. Let us choose love.

Following the way of love is exhausting. It is frustrating. It can be heartbreaking. Yet it is also the way that God showed us Jesus, both at his baptism at as he was transfigured. This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.

Amen

Mark 1.4-11

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