

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Robert Alexander, Associate Pastor
“Identity Crisis”
Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17
Baptism of the Lord
January 8, 2017

The weather today reminds me of a story about a man who resisted the call of God for years before finally responding in faith and placing his trust in Jesus Christ. As was the custom in his new faith community, he was baptized on Christmas Day. The Baptist minister literally broke the ice on the surface of the pond near their little church, then dunked the man in the frigid water once, twice, three times forward, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As he came up sputtering and gasping he shouted in triumph, “At last! It’s over.”

The minister smiled and said, “No, brother. It’s just beginning.”

Our Baptismal Font – placed prominently in the middle of our sanctuary – and thankfully not frozen over – reminds us each week that we are all walking together on a Faith Journey. Our baptism is not always the beginning of that faith journey and it is not the end of it but at the waters we come to understand who we are as children of God and who God is shaping us to be.

People approach baptism in different ways. If you were baptized as an infant, you didn’t have much choice in the matter. You were simply brought before the church and the church claimed the truth that in Christ you are chosen in love to be a child of God and to be a part of the family of faith. You were marked as Christ’s own and called into a life of faithful discipleship. A child who is baptized would affirm that for themselves at their Confirmation, much the same way that any of us affirms our own faith with the words of the ancient creeds that others have written and spoken long before us.

But whether you were baptized as an infant and then went through Confirmation or as an adult there was likely a period of instruction or preparation leading up to the event. Perhaps you learned that baptism symbolizes God’s power to cleanse us of our sins and to raise us to new life with Christ. Perhaps you learned that just as Christ, in His own baptism, was commissioned to go and to serve, so we are commissioned in our own baptisms to be God’s servant people in the world. Perhaps you learned the importance of daily fellowship with God through prayer and the reading of scripture and the importance of being connected to your brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ – the Church. Perhaps you and your family did all the things necessary to be prepared for that special moment.

There was one young father who misunderstood what it meant for his family to be prepared for baptism. The pastor approached him one day and said, “Baptism is a very serious step, are you and your family ready for it?”

“I think so.” The man replied. “My wife has made appetizers and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of cookies and cakes for the guests.”

“I don’t mean that,” the pastor responded. “I mean are you prepared spiritually.”

“Oh sure,” came the reply. “I have a refrigerator full of beer and a case of whiskey.”

Well – the young father was ready for *something*...but he may not have quite understood the significance of Baptism.

The Presbyterian Church’s Book of Order states that “Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God’s redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God’s gift of grace and also God’s summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for the ministry to the world.” (W-2.3006)

Each week, as if we were experiencing an identity crisis, the waters must remind us again of the truth of who we are as God’s people. The world constantly pulls at us and presents us with many opportunities to forget who we are. We get lost in the priorities of the world – chasing the status quo – trying to live up to someone else’s

standard – trying to please a boss – a friend – or some significant other. Chasing selfish aspirations, we live into habits that draw us away from our purpose. Protecting our own interests we treat others as lesser beings. We take on attitudes that are contrary to the scriptures and the teachings of Jesus. We become rigid in our approach to life rather than being open to what God might be calling us to do and be. But the Lord God is calling and has told us who we are. The God of all creation has given us our identity.

In our call to worship, the psalmist reminded us of God’s great power over all the earth. God is mighty and holy and God alone is to be worshipped and served.

The same voice that the Psalmist declares is over the waters, is powerful, shakes the wilderness, and breaks the cedars of Lebanon. The gospel of Matthew declares that this is the very voice that split open the skies and declared Jesus to be the beloved Son of God at his baptism.

The very same voice, through the prophet Isaiah, called to “the Servant of God” – reminding them of their identity. Not everyone agrees about who Isaiah was referring to – was it an historical figure present during the time of Israel’s exile in Babylon? Was it Israel herself? Was it a generic figure or was it spoken about one who was to come? We can hardly read the words without thinking of Jesus Christ - for the church has seen these words fulfilled in his life and ministry since its beginning. Matthew clearly intends for us to see Christ as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision.

“Here is my servant...my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” Says the Lord.

“This is my beloved Son – with whom I am well pleased.”

“I have put my Spirit upon him.”

“The Spirit of God descended like a dove and alighted on him.”

And in Isaiah – the voice of the Lord goes on to proclaim the role of God’s Servant. The servant will bring about justice and fair treatment for all. The servant will do so with gentleness and compassion and determination until justice is served in all the earth. The servant will open the eyes of the blind and will set prisoners free from their oppression and will bring those imprisoned in darkness out into the light.

In Isaiah’s prophetic message, the voice of the Lord declares – **“I Am Yahweh. I am the LORD.”** God places God’s stamp on these words – God’s authority. The voice of the Lord declares that it will be so!

We know from all the stories of scripture that Jesus embodied these words and this vision. He did bring justice – breaking down walls and lifting up the oppressed. He lived with compassion – caring for the least of these and gently humbling those who were too proud. He persevered – giving his all as he journeyed faithfully, step by step to the cross where he gave up his Spirit and declared, “It is finished.”

The same voice continues to speak to us in the baptismal waters – telling us who we are – children of God – beloved of the Heavenly Father who calls us to lives of justice and peace – who calls us to lives of obedience and faithfulness. That is the voice to which Jesus responded and that is the voice to which we must respond.

My New Testament professor Dr. Charlie Cousar wrote that “Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism says something to us about the nature of Christian baptism. Those who receive it are not only given distinctive names, but by the Spirit are commissioned to obedient, faithful service, to follow the path blazed by the unique Son of God. Their task, like his, has to do with establishing justice in the earth, with being a bonding power to the people and a light to the nations.” (Texts for Preaching, p. 99)

When I was in Graduate School we had a practice of reminding one another of our true identity as God’s own whenever we were near water. Someone would dip their fingers in some water and would flick that water onto the face of an unsuspecting class mate saying – “Remember Your Baptism.” What they meant by that was not – “remember the event – the moment that you were baptized – but rather – “Remember who you are!” “Remember your true identity.” Go ahead – try it this week!

Our identity is determined by our creator, our redeemer, and our sustainer – the one who gives, restores, and blesses our lives each and every day! We learn from Jesus what the beloved child of God is to be up to in the world.

As we read the scriptures, the stories of Jesus, we watch him caring for the leper, giving living water to the woman at the well, gently forgiving, restoring, and guiding the woman caught in adultery, calmly teaching the disciples about kingdom practices and values, feeding the hungry and responding to the needs of those along his journey. We see that he embodies the prophet’s words as one who does not “break a bruised reed” or “quench a dimly burning wick.” We learn about our own identity in Christ and discover who and how we are to be in the world.

Instead of criticizing a person whose life situation we don’t understand, we learn to take time to get to know them and listen to their story.

Instead of speaking with harsh words that cut people down and stifle conversation, we learn to invite dialogue and understanding.

Instead of belittling others with ways of being that demonstrate pride and arrogance, we learn to practice humility as we serve in the name of Christ.

Today we will ordain and install officers for service at Davidson College Presbyterian Church. They need our prayers as they discern how God is leading them to serve. As they make decisions they need wisdom. As they remember their own identity each week as children of God we pray for them to hear clearly the voice of God and to have the courage to step out in faith as servant leaders.

On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we declare that the God of all creation, who has come near to us in Jesus Christ, claims each of us, calls us by name, and calls us *beloved*. Just as God declared delight in Jesus Christ, the anointed Messiah, so God declares delight in us. At the font we declare that we are forgiven and set free to be the people God has created us to be in Christ. This story is at the center of who we are. Our identity is shaped by this story, by the life of Christ, and by our calling to love, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

(MOVE INTO THE REAFFIRMATION OF THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT)

To God be the Glory! Amen.