The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
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Isaiah 42: 1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10: 34-43; Matthew 3: 13-17

"This is my… Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." †

I believe that today's celebration of The Baptism of Our Lord emphasizes God's love for *all of us*, not just Jesus his Son, but *all* of us… and I'll try to explain why. First, I must admit that I've always found the liturgy associated with Jesus' Baptism to be a bit perplexing. We hear the story in the Gospel of Matthew of his baptism by John, and often we welcome people into our community through their baptism, and then we are called to renew our own Baptismal vows… But it can seem confusing. Was Jesus' baptism, the one we just heard about, the same as ours?

This is probably a good time to explain what Baptism is, in our tradition. Baptism is one of the great Sacraments of our Church, and per the catechism (found on page 857 of our *BCP*), 'sacraments our outward and visible signs of an inward spiritual grace given by Christ.' In Baptism the outward sign of water symbolizes a spiritual cleansing and an immersion into what is the Body of Christ. Baptism is the sacrament of initiation, in which God adopts us as Children and makes us members of Christ's Body, members of the Church, and inheritors of the Kingdom. At Baptism we are asked to accept Jesus Christ and his love, to follow his ways, and also reject any of those things or ways that are contrary to God. Through Baptism we are made new; we experience rebirth as children of God. Those who are baptized promise to follow Jesus Christ and the Way of Jesus. Today as an adult, Ethan promises himself, it's something he has prepared for and is committed to. At other times, as when infants are baptized, the promises are made on their behalf by Godparents and parents, who pledge to raise them in the faith and teach them the ways of Christ.
There is also an aspect of being changed and of changing one's ways through repentance. Yet we understand, as pointed out in our reading from Acts, God's forgiveness and acceptance is not accomplished by anything we do, but by grace— "everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." And thus, we become children of God and as children of God, we become his Body and are charged with doing his work on this earth (think about that when we renew our own Baptismal vows in a few moments).

Again, you may ask, was Jesus' baptism the same as ours? After all, John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sin and a way toward reconciliation with God. Repentance and forgiveness… but Jesus did not need forgiveness! I think John would agree, considering his objections. In the story we just heard, he was alarmed, convinced that he needed what Jesus could give, much more than Jesus needed anything from him. So, why did Jesus publically seek baptism?
Well, I believe *his* baptism served an important purpose in explaining just *who* Jesus is, both at that time for those who witnessed it and for us today who claim to be his followers. Consider that in seeking baptism by John, Jesus was making a *profound public statement*, his entrance into public life and ministry. For about 30 years, he was waiting for his 'time' to come (as he told his mother), humbly working as a carpenter. Then John emerged and started baptizing in the Jordan. It was at that point that Jesus knew it was 'his time.' Before John, ceremonies of

'baptism' and ritual immersion were not meant for Jews, but for *outsiders*. Baptism was used to purify those from foreign faiths, outsiders, those who were 'dirty' and needed spiritual and ritual cleansing to join the Jewish faith. Baptism was reserved for those who knew they were sinners, and only those who professed a desire to change their lives and grow closer to God. The Children of Abraham, God's Chosen Ones, felt sure of God's salvation and that they did not need such baptism. So, when Jesus saw so many people going out to John, in repentance, Children of Abraham who recognized their own sinfulness and their need for change, Jesus knew the time was right and his time had come. This was a first. Jewish men and women were conscious of their own failings and their need for God's forgiveness. He knew this is why he had been sent!

But why the baptism? What purpose did it serve? Jesus didn't need repentance or forgiveness! The answer may lie in today's scriptures. In the Gospel, we are told that immediately upon the baptism, "the heavens were opened and the spirit of God descended upon Jesus and a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"
***This is my Son*,** alluding to 'you are my Son' from the 2nd Psalm (2.7). And ***with whom I am well pleased*,** which is found in the writings of the prophet Isaiah (42), in reference to the promised anointed King, the Messiah… 'I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations…' and who is also the 'suffering servant,' the one who will come to save, to open the eyes of the blind… and who *will suffer* for the people. So, this scene depicting Jesus' baptism reveals to us *who he is*, God's anointed savior, and how Jesus' how his remarkable act of submitting to public baptism identifies him with those he came to save. He identifies with us!

The Feast of the Baptism of our Lord is a transition from Christmas toward Easter. Today the Advent wreath has been replaced by the Paschal candle, which is a symbol of Jesus life-giving presence in our lives. It symbolizes the mystery of our faith- Christ was born, Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. This candle is present at every baptism, to remind us of our Christ, the light which darkness can never overcome. The One who identifies with his people, humbling himself to be born human, to live as one of them, to be baptized with them, and to suffer and even die for them. Today we shift our focus from the newborn King, the Christ of the Crèche, and catch our first glimpse of the humility of our God, the Christ of the Cross. Through those words spoken by a voice from heaven, words that echo the promise of Isaiah long before— The One chosen to bring justice to the world will conquer evil and death, not by might… but by submission and love.

Why do we remember Jesus' baptism? Because it reveals to us that he is God's chosen servant, the Son with whom God is pleased, and it identifies Jesus with *us,* his people, reminding us how he came show us the Way. So today we also remember our baptisms and experience a spiritual 'tune up,' knowing that because of our own baptisms, *we* are able to identify with Christ.

As 'The Body of Christ' in this world, we are charged to be his eyes and ears, hands and feet, his voice in the world. We are called, in the words of Isaiah, to be a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring forth justice on the earth. When we renew our Baptismal promises in a few moments, we'll promise again to proclaim good news, to resist evil and whenever we fall, to repent and return to the Lord, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and promote justice!

Today we celebrate God's love for **all of us**… 'This is my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' That phrase refers to Jesus, and to *all* of us. Through baptism we are all promised, as God promises to Ethan today, 'that we shall not die but live' (Psalm 118.17), we shall not die but live in Christ and *nothing*, no power in heaven or on earth can change that!
We all are God's Beloved, called to be like Christ— to suffer for the sake of others, and bring forth justice. We are God's Beloved. May we embrace that love! ✝