

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR SOMEONE TO SAY TO YOU?”

A Sermon for The Baptism of Our Lord, January 8, 2017

Text: Matthew 3:13-17

I believe it would be a very positive experience if the sky opened and I saw the Spirit of God descending on me like a dove and sitting on my shoulder and a voice said “You are my Son; you are the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

I would be willing to settle for a lot less.

I would accept a blessing that was more along the lines of what Farmer Hoggett said to the little sheep-pig at the end of the movie “Babe”: “That’ll do, pig; that’ll do.”

It seems like it would be too much to ask, for God to give me a private audience so he could induct me into the “Ring of Honor” or “Ring of Blessing,” to confer on me the status of “Most Favored Person.”

I am willing to settle for a lot less.

In fact, I am willing to settle for what I have already received in the way of acceptance and praise. People say nice things to me with decent regularity. Twice in my life, for example, I have had the experience of another pastor’s wife telling me I had preached a good sermon. (Pastor’s wives are a little jealous about that sort of thing.)

I have a couple trophies and awards, some good parchment, and so on. I cannot complain at all. Mom and Dad loved me, and several people have told me they are (the equivalent of) well pleased with me. So, although people have from time to time scoffed at me and rejected me in ways that hurt awfully much, and although being a preacher is not as cool these days as it was in the 13th century, I’m satisfied. I guess.

But enough about me. How about you?

Have you had your share of praise in your life? Have people loved you enough? Have you felt like you belong—enough?

Have you had to do some sorting out? Have you been forced to deal with criticism by deciding whether to take it seriously? When life has dealt harshly with you, and I’m sure it has at times, have you found ways to rise above it? Has it come in the form of other people saying “That’ll do”? or “Nobody’s perfect”? or “You’re absolutely fabulous”?

If you feel totally accepted, loved, and approved, then you may already feel like Jesus, to whom the voice from heaven said “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The voice claimed Jesus: “This is my son.”

The voice reassured Jesus: “This one is the Beloved.”

The voice approved of Jesus: “With you I am well pleased.”

What I would like for each of you to take away from this sermon, on this feast day when we celebrate the baptism of our Lord, is that God has in fact addressed each of you with the same messages Jesus received on the day he was baptized by John in the Jordan. At your baptism, God claimed you; and through your becoming a part of the body of Christ the same things that are true of our Lord Jesus Christ are now true of you, inasmuch as you are in Christ.

What God said from the heavens to his Son Jesus, he says to you: You are God’s child; you are beloved; God is well pleased with you.

This is not the same as someone saying “God loves you just the way you are.” The difference is this:

“The way we are” is sadly defective. We fall short of the glory of God. We do not love one another as we ought. God doesn’t love that. What God loves is our dependence upon his grace for our righteousness. “God loves you, as you are in Christ” would be a better way to put it. “God loves you despite everything, because you are in Christ.”

Besides, what God said to Jesus at the Jordan and says to us at our baptism is superior to “God loves you just the way you are.” God says “This one, [fill in the blank with name], is my son or daughter, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” In our case, “for the sake of Christ.”

Now, there is one important theological point to make which helps make sense of this wonderful good news. It was a “voice” from the heaven that said “This is my son,” etc.

Faith believes what is not seen. And how shall you believe what you cannot see? You believe what you hear, even if it contradicts what you see.

So, for example, it may be plain to see from your circumstances, from the way life treats you, that you are not God’s beloved nor is God well pleased with you. There are never enough hours in the day, for example. If God loved you, why wouldn’t this or that problem go away? If God claims you, how come you suffer? “Evidence” means “what can be seen,” and evidence never seems to support the idea that anyone is well pleasing to God, except sometimes creeps get unfairly lucky and that doesn’t help the case, either.

So, in the midst of life, even when we confront the most desperate challenges, it is a voice that we hear which contradicts our suffering and promises that God has not abandoned us and never will. A voice says “Do not fear,” even when the wind and the waves are at their peak. A voice says “This widow has put in more than all the others.” A voice says “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any open to me I will come in to them.” Always, a voice calling

us to see beyond the horizon of our limitations and believe that God loves us and calls us to be his own. A voice commands us to live as though God will triumph in all things, over all enemies.

A voice from heaven—to which we can only respond with faith, or disbelief. If we trust our senses, we will not even see the dove or hear the voice, we will muddle along accepting that this is, unfortunately, the best of all possible worlds. But if we believe the voice, we can love and serve the God we cannot see.

We might not look to others like God’s favorites. But Jesus promises that we are, and that we shall shine like the sun. Not because of ourselves, not because of anything we can point to, but because of the one whose voice we have heard and believed.

Today I sprinkled you with water from the baptismal font, to help you remember what you have heard and believed, whom you have trusted, and what happened to you when you went through the waters of baptism. The skies opened and God called you by name. You appealed to God for a clean conscience (as 1 Peter says), and God bestowed it upon you, saying “I claim you; I love you; I am pleased with you, now and forever. Go in peace and serve the Lord.”

I know that today is about Jesus’ baptism, and what the voice said to Jesus. Perhaps it seems strange for me to make it about us, and our baptism. But that is precisely what baptism is about—uniting us with Jesus, so that what applies to him applies to us. That is good news. No, make that fabulous news.

Amen.