

January 8, 2017, Baptism of Our Lord

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**Focus:** God claims us as beloved children in baptism.

Think back on when you were really young. What do you remember? For me, I can remember odd flashes. Simple scenes without context. I remember happy things like scenes on my earliest baseball teams. Or I can remember sad things like when I attended my first funeral.

Then there are the random memories. There's one I'm thinking of today that I can't remember even when it was. I was probably about 10 years old. I had gone to sleep a couple hours before. My family lives in what Nikki would tell you is a very overcrowded century-old house. So everyone can hear everyone and everything else. And I must have woken up as my dad climbed up those century-old stairs. Because I heard him talking to my mom, and my mom told my dad something simple I had done earlier in the day: I don't even remember what it was. But I distinctly do remember what I heard my dad say next. "He's a good boy."

4 words. No context. And yet I still remember them today. We can sit me down on a couch and psychoanalyze me. We can make a great big deal of it. But probably many of us know what it's like to grow up and want someone's approval, especially a larger than life figure like a dad or a mom. One who raises you and puts food on the table and toys under the Christmas tree.

I can't tell you what it was about. And I can't tell you whether it was even true at the time, but to hear those words from my dad meant something. It meant something because as I grew up I know that I wasn't often the good boy that I was purported to be. More than that, it meant something because, if you know my dad, whenever he decides on something, he's set. It's the final authoritative word. Whether that's the movie *Fences* that we saw recently, "This is a great movie," or the hot cross buns that Nikki and I made for Easter, "Yeah, I didn't like them," there's an air of finality when my dad speaks. "He's a good boy."

"This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." There are lots of reasons to be pleased with Jesus. I'll just name a few, and this clearly doesn't exhaust the list: all the miracles, his powerful teaching and storytelling, his ability to forgive people who hurt him, his resolve to stick up against people a lot more powerful than himself, his love for his followers, and of course, let's not forget that he died for the sins of the world, defeated the powers of death and hell, rose again, and ascended into heaven in glory. Who wouldn't be proud of Jesus? Which parent sitting in the stands at the game wouldn't shout out, "that's my boy!"?

Chances are, we are never going to do those things. We are never going to preach or teach like Jesus where 5000 people gather all day on a hill just to listen to us. We are never going to feed those 5000 with five loaves and two fishes. We are never going to have Jesus's courage. We are never going to have his infinite powers of forgiveness. We are never going to see the Holy Spirit coming down like a dove from the sky to anoint us. And we are never going to hear those words from heaven: "This is my Son (or Daughter), the Beloved with whom I am well-pleased." We are never going to hear those 12 biblical words in our lives today.

So what? I don't think any of us really ever wanted that cloud-breaking moment or the voice from heaven. I don't think any of us really need a divine pat on the back. So why would we care?

For me, I cared about hearing those words from my dad because it meant that whether they were true or not, someone—not just someone—but the person I most looked up to—believed in me. I cared to hear those words because you can't always tell what people think. Sometimes especially in your family, who you're around constantly, who you do everything with, who you share life with, who, yes, get on each other's nerves from time to time. People who fight with each other and disappoint each other. But when I heard my dad speak those words, it gave me confidence. It built me up. It let me know that throughout it all, no matter what happened, this was the final judgment in his eyes: "he's a good boy."

"This is my Son, the beloved with whom I am well pleased." This is God's judgment on his Son Jesus. It may be easy to believe in those things about Jesus, but the amazing thing about these words isn't that God says them. It's not that God speaks in a voice from the heavens. That's rare, but it happens throughout the Bible. No. What's truly amazing about this story is that God says these words *before Jesus even does a thing*. In the first 3 chapters of Matthew's Gospel, we have heard about Jesus being born, we have heard about his parents fleeing with him to Egypt to keep him safe. The most Jesus has done is win a 2-verse theological argument with John the Baptist. Frankly, we have heard more about what King Herod has done so far than Jesus.

And yet when Jesus simply comes to be baptized, God the Father says, "This is my Son, the beloved with whom I am well pleased." These words don't have anything to do with what Jesus has done. They have everything to do with who Jesus is, and who God is.

When God sees Jesus, he doesn't see any of those things that we mentioned earlier. He doesn't see a miracle worker or a teacher or a healer or a courageous martyr. What does he see? His Son.

And that's enough. That's enough for God to call him beloved. And being beloved is enough for Jesus. It's enough for him to leave and go and stand against the devil in the wilderness immediately after his baptism. It's enough for him to leave and to be a light to the nations, to call people back to justice. It's enough for him to wrestle with the agony of the garden, and the nails of the cross, and the cold rock of the tomb and all the while to trust: I am beloved not just by any human father, but by the greatest Father there ever could be. No matter what happens, no matter how much I suffer and how terribly I die, no matter how many reject me, abandon me, and hate me the God of the universe loves me as a beloved child.

Think about your own baptism. Probably most of you can't remember it. But whether you were an infant or whether you were old enough to have lived some years before you were baptized, chances are you didn't do any mighty acts of Christian faithfulness beforehand. You and I didn't earn a voice from heaven. But when we were baptized, not because we were strong, not because we were worthy, not because we understood everything or anything, not even because we were good boys or girls, God loved us.

God loved us. God united us to Jesus. He united us to his Son, who was baptized with us. And because of that, if we listen closely, we do hear the same loud and clear words God spoke to Jesus, “You are my child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Not because of what we’ve done. But because of who we are. **Children of God.** And because of who God is. The Father of Jesus Christ, and our Father, too. The Father who claims us and loves us. The God whose final judgment on us is not what we have earned: but who in Christ is well pleased with us. Well pleased with us no matter how many temptations from the devil we face after leaving the baptismal font, no matter how many hours of doubt or agony we face, or no matter how few miracles seem to accompany us. Well pleased with us simply because in baptism we are our heavenly Father’s own beloved children.

Hearing those words makes all the difference. It means that we can leave the baptismal font for the journey ahead of us: for life in this world. We can leave the baptismal font and this church knowing that God has entrusted us with his mission for the world. We can leave knowing the power a few well-timed words of love can have. And we can go into the world with confidence that the God who called our brother Jesus back even from the tomb will after this life is over be pleased once again to call us his beloved children. **Amen.**