

The Baptism of Our Lord
Sunday, Jan. 8, 2023
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Some of you may be watching the popular streaming series “The Chosen.” As advertised, it’s “the biggest crowdfunded project in TV history and the first ever multi-season show about the life of Jesus.” The show’s so popular because, as those who watch it say, it depicts a very human Jesus and makes the biblical accounts of his life more real and relatable.

I agree, at times, we tend to forget Jesus was as human as we are. It helps when we strip away the theological overlays on the stories about his life to unveil Jesus the man as he became Jesus — the Chosen One. That is especially important when it comes to the story of Jesus’ baptism, in order for us to get a sense of what that moment meant for him in his life.

That said, the Bible contains few details of his life before that moment. We know that after King Herod died, God told Joseph in a dream to take Mary and Jesus back to his hometown of Nazareth. There, Jesus spent his childhood as the son of a carpenter, growing up in a household of faith. We might imagine that, at some point, his parents shared with him the miraculous ways in which God had been active in their lives, telling Jesus that God had a special plan for his life. Attending synagogue, Jesus heard the stories of his Jewish faith. He listened attentively as the Hebrew scriptures were read and discussed. With his family, he made pilgrimage to the temple for all the Jewish festivals. Luke tells the story of one of those times when Jesus became so engrossed in bantering back and forth with the rabbis, he didn’t notice that his family had left him behind in Jerusalem.

We also know Jesus cultivated a life of prayer and the ability to discern the Voice of God’s Wisdom. It’s quite possible his practice of retreating to the desert to pray began at an early age under the tutelage of his cousin John the Baptist. Coming of age in his own community of faith, Jesus experienced a growing awareness of God’s claim upon his life. In that way, he was very much as human as we are.

Jesus’ first act as an adult was to make public his own “yes” to being God’s Chosen One, echoing the consent voiced by both of his parents whom God had also chosen to further God’s plan of salvation. He asked his cousin John to baptize him, but John protested. Before taking a closer look at their conversation, the meaning of which is the subject of volumes of theological inquiry and interpretation, I wonder what other kinds of interactions these two young men shared growing up together.

Each of them needed to grow in their own understanding of their true identity. John came to understand his call to baptize people for the cleansing of their sin — the Jewish rite of purification necessary for entering into the presence of the Holy. At some point, God revealed to the Prophet John that a new day had dawned — the long-promised Messiah had come. John’s new mission was to prepare people for the Messiah’s coming into their lives — to invite them to be like their ancestors, who crossed the waters of the Jordan into the Promised Land and entered into a whole new way of living together that expressed their commitment to being God’s chosen people.

As Jesus watched his cousin follow God’s plan for his life, we can imagine that Jesus admired his cousin’s boldness in challenging people to that radical reorientation of their lives. Jesus would have been amazed at how his cousin dared to challenge the religious leaders, who came to be baptized but

refused to change their ways. We also recall it was John who was able to see that God was about to do something great in Jesus' life. As he proclaimed, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." And so, when the time came for Jesus to boldly demonstrate his commitment to being God's instrument of justice and righteousness, he wanted his cousin to lead him through the waters of new life.

While being baptized, God announced the truth of who Jesus is and commissioned him to live out that truth so that the kingdom of God will come on earth. "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased." We can imagine how profoundly those words struck Jesus. We know he had studied closely the scroll of the great prophet, mining Isaiah's words for clues to his identity and his life's mission. Coming up out of the waters and hearing God calling him Beloved would have hearkened Jesus ears back to God's promises: "Fear not, I have called you by name and you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you. You are precious and honored in my sight because I love you." In that moment, Israel's identity and calling as God's Beloved became Jesus' as well, and through his life and ministry have become our identity and calling. We who are precious and loved by God, and have passed through the waters of our baptism to become the Chosen Ones.

As we live into our identity and calling, we remember that salvation is always God's work, not ours. Israel was once "no people, a wandering tribe of desert nomads without national grandeur or power." But God chose to make Israel a great name, a holy people, a light to all nations. Why the people of Israel? The Bible doesn't tell us only that it was a result of the mystery of God's gracious love — a love Israel did nothing to earn. In fact, Israel did almost everything to betray and mock that love. Yet, through all its infidelity and waywardness, God still loved Israel and, time and again, God renewed God's choice of Israel to be God's Beloved. All throughout the Old Testament story of Israel's up and downs as the chosen people, the hero of the story is always God. God chose Jesus to be God's persistent love in the flesh, calling all people to know themselves as Beloved of God and calling them to model the way of Love in the world. People, who weren't chosen because they were better than anyone else, but because they desired to be baptized and born anew by the Spirit of life.

A pastor tells the story of teaching a sixth-grade Sunday school class, and the topic was Peter the disciple who, try as he might, never seemed to understand what Jesus was saying. The pastor talked about how, even after all they had been through together, Peter ran and hid whenever the going got rough. Yet for all his failings, Peter was the man whom Jesus called the rock and it would be his faith upon which the church was built. When he had finished, the pastor asked the class, "What does that tell you about Jesus?" A little boy raised his hand and said, "that Jesus is a lousy judge of character."

The good news for us, as we remember our baptism, is that we are all like the before- and after-Peter. That even though we can be at times thick-headed and doubting, impulsive and cowardly like he was, God has chosen us to be the building blocks of his kingdom. And, God is still the hero in our story.

Endowed with the Spirit, we find our courage, our faith, our integrity to live out our God-given identity as God's own Beloved. This morning, we again come to the font to affirm our identity as God's beloved and to say our yes to God's claim upon our lives.