

MT 3:13-17 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

My father was a quiet man, who preferred to keep his feelings to himself. But as a child, I needed to know: how does Dad see me? Is he proud of his son? I'm sure that at times I made him wonder why he wanted a family! But I cherish the times when I heard my father say, face to face, and sometimes publicly, "Son, I'm proud of you." Those words made all the difference, and I made sure: my son and daughters heard the same from me.

I speak as a son and as a father, but this is just as valid for a father or a mother, for a daughter or a son. We are wired from birth to take our signals from above all, our parents. If they affirm us, we are confident. But if we did not receive that, its absence haunts us. I believe Jesus faced this same longing—it's part of the human journey.

It's the first Sunday after Epiphany on the Christian calendar. "Epiphany" means an unveiling, a discovery, an "Aha" moment when something shrouded in mystery becomes clear. When the Wise Men arrived, Jesus was recognized by Gentiles for the first time—an Epiphany. Today, Jesus is all grown up, and as He stands after His baptism, dripping wet, God points to this ordinary-looking man and says: "*This is my Son, the beloved; in Him I am well pleased.*"

A lot had already happened by the time He steps into the Jordan that day. His birth, for example—despite being born homeless, both mother and baby survived—remarkable for that time. He not only survived birth; He survived Herod, the territorial governor who was any nation's worst nightmare: immense power in the hands of an ego as fragile as an eggshell, that made Herod lash out at enemies real and imagined, even a newborn baby. History says that Herod was paranoid and vicious enough to order the execution of his own sons; and, we read in Scripture, the birth of an infant king led him to order the slaughter of every baby and toddler in the land, just to keep his power secure.

Growing up in a world like that *had* to affect Jesus; at the least, it taught Him that the world was broken. He saw first hand how most people lived lives of quiet desperation; how the powers-that-be had failed to bring justice—including the *religious* powers, who just *added* to the burdens the people carried. He also knew that if you meekly comply with the Herod's of the world, while it's safer, it also makes you partly responsible for standing by as the suffering continues.

And so on this day, Jesus steps away from a life of quiet conformity. He steps into the Jordan River and publicly sides with a radical outsider and activist and troublemaker named John. John preached that both the religious and political worlds were morally bankrupt and spiritually empty, and Jesus agreed. This was risky. Baptism was an act of open rebellion, and there would be consequences; neither John nor Jesus lived into old age.

But Jesus already knew what we must remember: that the Herod's of the world who lust for power, who ruthlessly ridicule and threaten and try to destroy any who oppose them—they may *achieve* power, but it comes with an expiration date. Every genius who invents the next must-have gadget will be replaced by the *next* "big thing," and the *next*. Every Hall of Fame QB is worn out by age 40. The same goes for every prime minister, monarch, or dictator. And,

every President too. No matter how they push their way into power, they hold an office with a shelf life of 4 years, maybe 8, and then they have to go away.

So when Jesus arrived on the banks of that river, with no power, no money, no army, He had already outlived Herod, and He knew that the center of power was not in Rome, not even in Jerusalem, and certainly not in Washington. He found the center of power, the Way of the future, on that day, on the banks of that muddy little river in the wilderness, when the heavens, the original Greek suggests, were “ripped open”, and He heard the grace-filled affirmation that He, Jesus, was pleasing to God. Before He preached a single sermon or healed a single illness, He was *loved* by God. And on that fact alone, not even death would stop Him.

Nor can it stop us. Being loved by God means being called by God. You may have heard me say it before: God’s love comes to us on its way to someone else. On the day of His baptism, Jesus began a love-fueled life that would change the world—including ours.

“Baptism,” Jim Keat writes, “is saturated in hope. The baptism of a young child evokes a sense of awe and wonder, a collective hope for who they will become as they grow up and how this community will journey with them. Jesus, raised from the waters of the Jordan River, became the hope for those who followed him, inviting them to discover a new way to live in the world, loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us, realizing that the reign of God is already among us, with us, and within us.... Whatever waters wage around us, we remember a story of ... the son of God rising from the river to hear the words that echo at every baptism to follow: “You are my Beloved.”

We want this word of affirmation too. We want to know that we are “beloved,” that someone is “well pleased” with us. We may try to make ourselves worthy, but the Good News of the Gospel is that, if we clawed our way to the top and have the corner office with the view, or if we feel the whole world is judging us and labeling us as undeserving, we, *today*, are the beloved, basking in God’s affirmation, held in God’s embrace, because we are the sisters and brothers of the One who heard those words first.

“So... remember your baptism. Remember that you are beloved by God and called by God to walk forward in the hope of new life for today and every tomorrow.”

Jim Kast-Keat 01-02-2017 in Sojourners

Beloved by God and called by God... called into a world desperate for Good News, justice, and hope. Called to be God’s beloved radicals, joyful troublemakers if need be, boldly, defiantly, bringing the spirit of Jesus to our world, and calling the powers to account.

And for this moment, dear ones, a place at God’s table is waiting, for all who dare to believe that we, too, are, on this very day, God’s “beloved, in whom God is well pleased.”