

Psalm 29

- ¹ Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- ² Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.
- ³ The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.
- ⁴ The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
- ⁵ The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- ⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- ⁷ The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
- ⁸ The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- ⁹ The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"
- ¹⁰ The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
- ¹¹ May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Sermon

There are a lot of things in this world that we identify ourselves with. We do it all the time, for purposes both noble and ignoble. There are the biggies: things like our family situations or our careers, our faith traditions or our countries of birth or current residence. I'm Kelly, I'm a pastor, I'm a spouse to John, a parent to three kids, I'm Christian, specifically of the Reformed flavor, and I'm an American citizen, although I chose not to pledge allegiance to the flag, a resident of the state of Oregon, and I've also formally resided and voted in Washington, Michigan, and New Jersey.

Then there are the slightly less life changing, but often no less important identifications: favorite sports teams, or the colleges we graduated from, hobbies or clubs we belong to, media we enjoy. I actively identify as **not** a sports fan, except for the Olympics, I went to UW and couldn't care less about the huskies, although I certainly loved my time there. I went to Princeton, but not the Ivy League one. I listen to a lot of Elliot Smith and Nirvana. I love to read, I'm a baker and a quilter, and I willingly wake up at 5:30 am three times a week to go to spin class, and I'd do it more often if I could. I'm the den mother for the Tiger scouts of pack 100, I'm a hiker and a backpacker and an occasional mountain climber, but only if the route is nontechnical. I love Doctor Who and Battlestar Galactica, but Star Trek: The Next Generation will always and forever be my favorite.

And then there's the commercial allegiances we all swear to regularly, with the power of our almighty dollar. That's our brand preference, our store preference, what apps we're willing to load on our phones to save an extra few cents, or, more often than not, what stores and products we won't spend our time and money on. Again, I'm Kelly. I prefer to purchase my books at Powell's, and I'll spend the extra few bucks to do it, but I've been known to order from Amazon with little shame. I have the Starbucks app on my phone, although I prefer my local coffee bar, Guilder. I tend to grocery shop at Fred Meyer, but when I lived in Michigan I got my groceries at the other Fred Meijer. Spelled M-E-I-J-E-R. True story, there are literally two different Fred Meyers/Meijers in the world, both owned by Kroger, spelled differently, founded by different Fred Meyers/Meijers. I have an Ikea Family Card in my wallet, and it gets action from time to time. And I like to buy my clothes at REI. Much to the chagrin of my more fashion-conscious friends.

I could go on and on, but you get the point, and I'm sure you're already tallying up your own lists of allegiances and identifying characteristics. Every day, with each minute of our time and dollar that we spend, we're pledging ourselves to something, and allowing ourselves and our values to be shaped by those same things. Sometimes we do so with great intent: the money we donate to causes most important to our own hearts, or a few extra bucks to buy the book at the local store, or the hour on Sunday spent here, rather than over there, or the years we put into training and honing our careers and crafts. But I suspect that if you're like me, there's also a lot of times when the decisions and money and identifications you're taking on have less thought to them than we'd like. Amazon is expedient and easy and right at my fingertips, and so I chose it a lot. But I'm also not totally sure it's the company I want defining my values. The same could be said for my

perspective on the US. There's a lot I love and appreciate about our country...and a lot I'd rather not have attached to my name.

And all of this, the identifications we choose and allow ourselves to become defined by, this is also the story of baptism. Or at least, it should be if we understand baptism properly. Because baptism is a sacrament of identification.

When Jesus comes to the Jordan River on that fine afternoon, asking to be baptized by John, he's actually doing something pretty radical, and his identification right here, at the start of his public ministry, says something loud and clear. See, John the Baptist, if you'll remember, is what theologians technically refer to as "a weirdo." He walked around, preaching in the desert, eating bugs, wearing a shirt made out of animals skins, but not the fashionable kind, and basically looking like an unkempt Wildman. He wasn't a clean cut priest, doing his rote and liturgically correct duty in the cold, quiet halls of the temple, wearing his neat and tidy vestments. And by choosing to go to John, Jesus is placing a sort of stamp of approval on this weirdo, this outside the lines, street preacher, over and against the religious authorities of the day. And he's setting us up to see that he is going to be a religious leader and speaker of a totally different stripe. Not the one we expected.

And God shows up, in the form of the dove and the voice, and says, yes. You are mine, and you are beloved.

These two things tell us a lot about what baptism means for every one of us.

First of all, baptism is a sacrament which welcomes us into the dominion of God, a sort of "state" that surpasses nation or ethnicity or group, in the way we would think of it. And it tells us: the reign of God is not going to be what you expect. At all. When we celebrate baptism together, whether on behalf of a child, an adult, or simply in the reminder of our own baptisms, we are choosing to identify ourselves with God's kingdom, which is full of weirdos and the unexpected. Mary told us as much from her own Magnificat: in God's kingdom, everything is upside down—the rich are sent away empty, but the poor will be filled full. In God's reign, everyone will have enough, and the greedy and powerful will be put in their place. Baptism, from our side, is a choice to enter into this community, to identify ourselves with the topsy turvy world of God's dominion.

But baptism, of course, isn't about our choice, it's really about God's grace extended to us. The story of the baptism of Jesus isn't about Jesus choosing John, or even choosing baptism. It's really the story of God showing up and saying, I choose you. Before we can do anything, before we can choose a career or a college or a sports team or a store or a church, God first says: I choose you. Baptism is the mark of God's grace upon each of us, a gift freely given by God, and not ever something we earn or choose. That's why we baptize infants in our tradition, because God's grace is right there, right from the start.

And this is beautiful and confirming and so welcome, if we choose to believe it. That our identity is first and foremost defined by this act, by the grace of God choosing each and every person as God's beloved, as God's own, a unique and lovely creation. Not because of

what we do, but simply because we are. This is the identity of baptism. And by choosing to enter into this water, as a response to God's grace, we then identify ourselves with God's work in this world.

It becomes our primary and central identity, upon which all else is built, if we believe. If we simply believe the already true fact that we are loved, simply because we are, and that out of this gracious love, all of our other work and identity becomes possible.