

Chosen

Have you ever been chosen in a way that changed your life? The summer between tenth and eleventh grade, my family moved. In the place where we had lived the previous three and a half years I felt like I had never fit in. I had spent life as an outsider, not feeling welcomed, not sure of the rules. Of course none of that has anything to do with the fact that I was in junior high most of those years, a time that is awkward for just about everyone. The fact remains, for most of those years I felt like the one who was never chosen, the one no one wanted.

A week or so after we moved in, my mom was invited to lunch to meet some of the neighbors and told them she had a teenaged daughter. That night a pick up truck full of teenagers pulled up in our driveway to take me to youth group, and that weekend I went on a camping trip with the whole group. I had been chosen. I had an identity as part of that group. I had a community and a purpose that got me through the next two years and beyond. Although none of us would have used those words, I knew I was beloved. That knowledge gave me the strength I needed to set me on the path that led me here today.

We don't know why Jesus left Nazareth and walked to Jericho to be baptized by John. Nazareth and Jericho aren't that close together when you're walking. It's not a casual journey. It's a trip that takes some forethought and several days of walking. We do know that for Jesus, that moment in the muddy Jordan was a turning point. Matthew doesn't tell us anything about Jesus from the time he was a toddler, when his parents took him to Egypt fleeing from Herod until he appears as an adult asking John the Baptist to baptize him. After that baptism everything changes because he had been chosen.

In the moment when he comes up from the water, Jesus sees the Holy Spirit come on him like a dove from heaven, and he and everyone around him hears the voice. "This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

In that moment, the identity that Jesus has always had is publicly recognized. He is God's beloved son. No matter what he does from that point out, no matter what the world does to him from that point on, that identity can never be taken from him. It gives him an unshakeable base to stand on. He is God's beloved.

In our baptisms, Jesus shares that identity with us. We too are named and claimed as God's beloved. In this world that is shaken by so many forces, by earthquakes rooted in the ground, by military might, by the human striving for power that shakes down the poor and the vulnerable, our identity as God's beloved children gives us solid ground on which to stand.

Roger Nishioka tells a story that's familiar to a lot of us who have worked with youth in the church. Kyle was a boy whose family was kind of loosely connected with church, so he had not been baptized as an infant, but when it came time for confirmation, Kyle showed up at every class. He was an active participant, he took part in all the conversations, worked with his mentor, was a good friend in faith to the other kids. Pentecost Sunday came and Kyle was baptized and confirmed on the same day, with great rejoicing all around. Then he disappeared. He and his parents had assumed that baptism and confirmation were the end of the story. But baptism is a beginning not an end. Our identity as God's beloved, God's chosen is our starting place, not our finish line.

Nishioka says, In Matthew's text, the baptism of Jesus is the beginning of his ministry. It is his launching. It is his commissioning to begin the public ministry for which he was created and to which he was called. To be sure, the baptism of Jesus named his identity, and this is crucial. Identity, however, is not a static thing. One's identity grows and deepens, as Jesus' identity did throughout his public ministry. His identity is as much about purpose as it is about personhood.

Joy Moore calls Baptism a journey that begins at a fork in the road where one path is chosen and another is rejected. It is our surrender to God's

righteousness that is not merely individual moral conduct but a focus on relationships restored.

Baptism for Jesus and for us is a recognition of identity as God's beloved, God's child. But as Jesus comes out of the water, he is also sent off in a new direction, with a new purpose.

One way of understanding his purpose is found in the passage we read from Isaiah this morning. Those words were first spoken to a people in exile who were dispirited and had lost hope and faith. To these people who needed hope and comfort, the prophet spoke about the servant of God, who was God's chosen, God's beloved. The servant of God is gentle, someone who won't trample down a bent reed or snuff out a dim lamp, someone who brings justice and righteousness, who helps the blind see and sets prisoners free. For people who have been defeated and abused, this servant is who they need.

It's a very different image of what power and privilege look like. In our world power and privilege often have to do with throwing your weight around, with making sure you get your way, with putting other people down so that you are lifted up. Power often means standing on the backs of others, not bending over yourself to help them stand up straight.

For Jesus, this passage and others like it gave him purpose and direction. It set the course for the life he led, teaching and healing, reaching out to those who were bound by illness or social status and lifting them up to help them shine. In the end, he stood up to the powers-that-be and gave his life not so he could get more power but so by his death he could set us free from death.

Rachel Held Evans described what happened in the waters of Jesus' baptism this way:

Just as water carried Moses to his destiny down the Nile, so water carried another baby from a woman's body into an expectant world. Wrapped now in flesh, the God who once hovered over the waters of creation was plunged beneath them at the hands of a wild-eyed wilderness preacher. When God

emerged, he spoke of living water that forever satisfies and of being born again. He went fishing and washed his friends' feet. He touched the ceremonially unclean. He spit in the dirt, cast demons into the ocean, and strolled across and angry sea. He got thirsty and he wept.

After the government washed its hands of him, God hung on a cross where blood and water spewed from his side. Like Jonah, he got swallowed up for three days.

Then God beat death. God rose from the depths and breathed air once again. When he found his friends on the shoreline, he told them not to be afraid but to go out and baptize the whole world.

The Spirit that once hovered over the waters had inhabited them. Now every drop is holy.

And it is in that holy water that we too are baptized. It is in that holy water that we are named as God's beloved. And it is from that holy water that we too are sent out with a purpose, as God's servants, to be God's just and gentle presence in the world, renewing, encouraging and lifting up those who are weak and vulnerable, as God in Christ has done for us.

This morning we are given the opportunity to remember that we are baptized, to receive the cleansing of the waters and the gift of the Holy Spirit, to hear those words that we are loved and chosen, and to renew our commitment to Jesus Christ and his purpose in the world. As we do, I ask you to stand if you are able, as we renew the promises made when we were baptized.

Baptism is a turning from the old way of sin and turning toward the way of God. Therefore, the first question I ask you is,
Do you turn from the ways of sin

And renounce evil and its power in the world?

(I do)

Do you turn to Jesus Christ

And accept him as your Lord and Savior,

Trusting in his grace and love?

(I do)

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple,

Obedying his Word and showing his love?

(I will with God's help.)

With the whole church let us confess our faith.

(The Apostles' Creed.)

PRAYER OVER THE WATER

THANKSGIVING FOR BAPTISM

Leader: As we reaffirm the gift of our baptism,
let us offer praise to God.

You, O God, are the voice above the waters –
thundering wisdom,
flashing glory,
showering grace.

People: We praise you.

Leader: You send Jesus to give us living water-
the cup of blessing,
the cup of promise,
the cup of salvation.

People: We give you thanks.

Leader: Now send your Spirit to make this water
a pool of healing,
a river of new life,
a flood of grace.

People: We glorify you.

Leader: Keep us one with you –
one in the way
and the truth
and the life of Christ Jesus our Lord.

**People: We praise you,
we thank you,
we glorify you,
now and forever. Amen.**