

Sermon
The Baptism of the Lord
January 8th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Rev. Victoria Scott

Readings: [Isaiah 42:1-9](#); [Psalm 29](#); [Acts 10:34-43](#); [Matthew 3:13-17](#)

When I was at St. Luke's, one of my favourite things to do was to throw open the main wooden doors on Bell Street whenever I was in the building. It is certainly a poignant memory now that the doors to that parish are permanently closed, but when I had those doors open it created a buzz. People noticed and all kinds of people would come in. One Friday morning when I had the doors open I had a visitor. She came in and said "I have a question for you." She asked me: "Is God downstairs at St. Luke's Table? (In case you don't know, St. Luke's Table is a day program for the vulnerable and marginalized, one of our Diocesan Community Ministries.) She asked "Is God downstairs at St. Luke's Table? Or, is God only up here in the church?" I told her that God is everywhere. There is no upstairs or downstairs when it comes to God's presence with us and in us.

Jesus came to show us that isn't "somewhere out there". God isn't in one place more than another – upstairs or downstairs, in here or out in the world. God isn't a destination and faith isn't an achievement. *God is with us*, and God links everything – every person, all of creation.

God entered our time and space as a “with” – as a relationship of mother and child.

Today we celebrate Jesus’s baptism. Jesus is baptized *with* the lineup of sinners who gathered on the banks of the river Jordan to be baptized by John. Jesus’s baptism is a statement of solidarity – a “with-ness” that shaped his earthly ministry, his suffering, his death. In his book “A Nazareth Manifesto” Sam Wells says this about solidarity, calling it an icon of the word “church”:

“Solidarity means every attempt to make concrete the intangible links between people, links based on love and trust and dignity and understanding and respect. It means all the ways people seek to stand alongside those who are in pain or sorrow, treated cruelly or unfairly, facing fear or the unknown. Solidarity is the word “with” turned in to practical action, the word “understanding” turned into genuine support, the word “identification” turned into courageous acts of witness.” (*A Nazareth Manifesto*, 78)

Jesus’s baptism is a statement of solidarity. It makes visible the invisible links between God and us, and between us and each other and all of creation. Jesus lines up with sinners along the banks of the river Jordan as a statement of solidarity: he is *with* them. Jesus shows solidarity with all of humanity by making his flesh – his body, his humanity – subject to the touch of hand and water. He shows solidarity with the created world by being immersed in water, and coming up into air. We see Jesus’s solidarity with God when the

heavens open and the dove descends and the voice announces “This is my Son, the Beloved...”.

“This is my Son, the Beloved...”. This message of belovedness is not just for Jesus: it’s for all of us. For all of creation. Jesus’s baptism is recounted in each of the four Gospels, and each telling agrees on how (by John) and where (the River Jordan) Jesus is baptized. It’s less clear in Matthew’s Gospel, but in Luke the message – the message of attention and love, of recognition and belovedness – is for everyone.

Jesus is the solidarity between us and God, and we are beloved. This solidarity draws all of us, all of creation together in God.

I know why my visitor on that Friday morning asked me if God was downstairs at St. Luke’s Table or just upstairs in the church. It’s the idea that God is “somewhere out there”.

The conviction that God is “somewhere out there” and the idea that God is a problem solver are tearing us apart. These ideas lead to questions like “Why isn’t God *doing* something? Questions like “Where is God in...any number of places in our world? Where is God in Ukraine...Afghanistan...Syria...the United States...? Where is God here in Canada on reserves that have had boil water advisories in place for generations...Where is God when addiction destroys lives? Where is God on the streets that are the only place some people have to lay their heads at night?

These are the place God came to be with – not for – us. These are the places where God is in solidarity with us, and where we must act in solidarity with others, and with our world. God didn't come to solve our problems – the problems of the world – for us. God came to be with us in solidarity as we do the solving.

These ideas of God “out there”, and the struggle to see God in the midst of pain and suffering and injustice in our world have been tightly woven into religion for centuries. So much of religion has been about trying to define where God is and where God isn't. Trying to define who is in God's image and who isn't.

Sam Wells also says this:

“For Jesus, our real problem as human beings is our alienation from God and one another. This is what changes in Jesus. Jesus is the solidarity between us and God...”.

Solidarity. This is what will change and heal our world.

Richard Rohr says this:

Either we see the divine image in all created things, or we don't see it at all. Once we see God's image in one place, the circle keeps widening. It doesn't stop with human beings and enemies and the least of our brothers and sisters. It moves to frogs and pansies and weeds. Everything becomes enchanting with true sight. We cannot not live in the presence of God. (Center for Action and Contemplation, January 5th, 2018)

I'm offering Epiphany Star Words throughout this Epiphany season. Some of you received them on Friday night at our Epiphany Party, and I have more here this morning. You don't get to go through them and find one you like. They are chosen randomly, and guided by the Spirit, and you're invited to accept your word with an open mind and an open heart, and to reflect on the word in different ways this year. Epiphany Star Words can help us to look for God in our midst. They can change our perspective, and focus our attention. May they be a reminder of God with us, in all things.

I pray that we will all see and feel the solidarity between us and God that Jesus makes known and that is alive in the working of the Spirit. I pray that each and every one of us will see and feel ourselves as beloved by God, and that this solidarity and belovedness will sustain, support, and inspire us all, today, and every day. In Jesus name. Amen.