

Matthew 2: 1-12

ON THE FIRST SUNDAY FOLLOWING JANUARY 6TH, EPIPHANY, CHURCHES OBSERVE SOMETHING CALLED *THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD SUNDAY*; AND AS SOON AS PASTORS GET THOSE WORDS OUT, PEOPLE'S EYELIDS GET HEAVY. ISN'T THIS JUST SOME ANCIENT OBSERVANCE ON OUR LITURGICAL CALENDAR? WHY WAS HE BAPTIZED WITH US WHEN HE COULD HAVE STAYED ON THE BANKS OF THE JORDAN SUPERVISING JOHN THE BAPTIST?

BECAUSE HE LOVES US, AND BECAUSE HE HAS COME TO LEAD US THROUGH THE WATERS OF LIFE AND DEATH INTO LIFE ETERNAL. IN OUR READING FROM LUKE WE HEAR THE JESUS WAS BAPTIZED WITH ALL THE PEOPLE. JESUS PRESENTED HIMSELF FOR BAPTISM AS AN ACT OF SOLIDARITY WITH A NATION AND A WORLD OF SINNERS. AT THIS BAPTISM, JESUS IDENTIFIED WITH THE DAMAGED AND BROKEN PEOPLE WHO NEEDED GOD.

THE STORY OF JESUS' BAPTISM IS CRUCIAL. IT WAS AT THE MOMENT OF BAPTISM THAT JESUS WAS CLAIMED AND CALLED. YES, THE ANGELS SANG AT BETHLEHEM, BUT GOD'S VOICE SPOKE FOR THE FIRST TIME AT THE RIVER, ACKNOWLEDGING THAT JESUS WAS CLAIMED BY SOMEONE SPECIAL AND CALLED TO DO SOMETHING SPECIAL. TODAY'S CHALLENGE IS ACTUALLY TO REMEMBER WHO WE ARE...THAT WE TOO ARE CLAIMED AND CALLED BY CHRIST. CALLED AND CLAIMED TO DO SOMETHING SPECIAL.

AT SOME POINT IN TIME, A VOICE SPOKE YOUR NAME AND SAID, "THIS IS MY BELOVED CHILD, WITH WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED." PERHAPS YOU WERE ONLY A BABY AT YOUR BAPTISM, TOO SMALL TO REMEMBER MUCH LESS UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT OF GOD, TOO YOUNG TO EVEN KNOW THERE WAS A GOD. BUT THAT WASN'T THE POINT. REMEMBER, JESUS DIDN'T SAY OR DO ANYTHING AT HIS BAPTISM EITHER. IT WAS ALL DONE FROM THE TOP DOWN. IT WAS ALL A MATTER OF GOD CLAIMING HIM, JUST AS IN YOUR OWN BAPTISM, GOD CLAIMED YOU BEFORE YOU'D DONE A SINGLE THING TO EARN IT.

A PASTOR TELLS THE STORY OF A MAN, A LEADER IN HIS CONGREGATION. HE WAS AN EXAMPLE OF ALL THINGS GOOD AND DECENT AND HELPFUL. HIS WISE FAITH GAVE GUIDANCE TO THE WHOLE CHURCH. BUT BY HIS OWN ADMISSION HE HAD NOT ALWAYS BEEN THAT WAY. HE SHARED THAT AS A YOUNG MAN HE WAS ALWAYS LOOKING FOR TROUBLE. AND IF THE TROUBLE WERE REALLY BAD, HE'D LOOK TWICE. BUT THEN HE SAID, "I MET ELIZABETH..A KIND, SWEET, MORAL, SMILING GIRL WHO LOVED ME NO MATTER HOW BIG A SCOUNDREL I WAS. AND LITTLE BY LITTLE, BECAUSE I WANTED TO LIVE UP TO HER LOVE, I BECAME LESS AND LESS A SCOUNDREL. FINALLY WE MARRIED, AND I'VE SPENT MY WHOLE LIFE TRYING TO MAKE HER AS HAPPY AS SHE MADE ME. THE TRUTH, HE SAID, IS ELIZABETH LOVED ME INTO LOVING.

THAT IS THE FIRST LESSON OF BAPTISM AND A KEY REASON WHY IT IS SUCH A VITAL PART OF OUR FAITH. GOD CLAIMS US AT BAPTISM. GOD SENDS UNEARNED, UNCONDITIONAL LOVE OUR WAY. GOD CLAIMS US...CHOOSES US AS PART OF HIS FAMILY. I CHOOSE TO WALK WITH YOU THROUGH THE WATERS, AND THE RIVERS SHALL NOT OVERWHELM YOU...AND TO WALK WITH YOU THROUGH THE FIRE, AND THE FLAMES SHALL NOT CONSUME YOU...YOU ARE PRECIOUS AND HONORED IN MY SIGHT, AND I LOVE YOU...SO FEAR NOT, FOR I CHOOSE TO BE WITH YOU IN ALL THINGS, IN ALL TIMES, IN ALL PLACES, IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES, NOW AND FOREVER. I CHOOSE TO LOVE YOU WHETHER OR NOT YOU ARE ALWAYS LOVABLE. THAT'S THE MESSAGE OF BAPTISM, ONE WHICH SHOULD GRIP AND INSPIRE US.

OUR GRANDDAUGHTER, ADY, IS IN THIRD GRADE AND IS RECEIVING HER BIBLE IN WORSHIP THIS MORNING AT HER CHURCH. BEFORE RECEIVING THEIR BIBLES, FAMILIES OF THE 3RD GRADERS RECEIVE THE BIBLES BEFOREHAND AND ARE ENCOURAGED TO HIGHLIGHT A FAVORITE PASSAGE. AS I HELD ADY'S BIBLE LAST WEEK, I PRAYED OVER IT AND I PRAYED FOR LITTLE ADY. WITH HIGHLIGHTER IN HAND, I PAUSED AS THERE WERE SO MANY FAVORITES I WANTED TO HIGHLIGHT. WHAT FROM GOD'S WORD WOULD I WANT ADY TO READ, TO DIGEST, TO TAKE INTO HER HEART AND BELIEVE?

I CHEATED AND HIGHLIGHTED MORE THAN ONE VERSE IN HER BIBLE BUT 2 WERE READINGS FROM TODAY. "ISAIAH 43: I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME, ADY, YOU ARE MINE. WHEN YOU'RE IN OVER YOUR HEAD, I'LL BE THERE WITH YOU. WHEN YOU'RE IN ROUGH WATERS, YOU WILL NOT GO DOWN. WHEN YOU'RE BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE, IT WON'T BE A DEAD END. BECAUSE YOU ARE PRECIOUS IN MY SIGHT, AND HONORED, AND I LOVE YOU. DON'T BE AFRAID, ADY, I'M WITH YOU."

AND THEN FROM LUKE: YOU ARE MY CHILD, CHOSEN AND MARKED BY MY LOVE. YOU ARE THE PRIDE OF MY LIFE."

BAPTISM SAYS THAT WE ARE CLAIMED AND CALLED TO DO SOMETHING SPECIAL. THE SAME SPIRIT THAT DESCENDED UPON JESUS AS DOVE, DESCENDS UPON YOU AND ME, CALLING US NOT SIMPLY TO BE GOD'S CHILDREN BUT ALSO TO BE GOD'S HELPERS IN A WOUNDED WEARY WORLD. OUR BAPTISMS REMIND US WE ARE CLAIMED, IN SPITE OF OURSELVES, AND ONCE WE BECOME AWARE OF HOW DEEPLY WE ARE LOVED BY GOD, WE FIND OURSELVES FALLING IN LOVE WITH GOD. AND WE EXPRESS THAT LOVE BY HOW WE DO OUR LIVING IN THE WORLD. GOD LOVES US INTO LOVING.

GOD'S WORD TO EACH OF US TODAY IS "YOU ARE MY BELOVED ONES..WHEN YOU ARE IN EXILE, WHEN YOU ARE IN WATERS OVER YOUR HEAD; WHEN YOU WALK THROUGH THE FIRES, YOU SHALL NOT BE BURNED. DO NOT FEAR. I AM WITH YOU.

THERE ARE MANY INSTANCES IN OUR WORLD WHERE PEOPLE ARE IN SITUATIONS OF EXILE. HOW CAN WE HEAR THE WORDS “WHEN YOU WALK THROUGH THE FIRES, YOU SHALL NOT BE BURNED,” AND NOT THINK OF THE THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE DISPLACED AND HOMELESS BECAUSE OF THE CALIFORNIA FIRES. AS PEOPLE CALLED AND CLAIMED BY GOD TO DO SOMETHING SPECIAL, OUR CALLING IS TO PRAY, TO GIVE. GOD’S LOVE LOVES US INTO LOVING OTHERS.

WE WORSHIP A GOD WHO WON’T LET US GO! WE ARE CALLED TO TRUST THAT GOD IN JESUS HAS BEEN ON THE GROUND, IN THE WATER, THROUGH THE FIRE, WITH US. EVEN IN THE MOST DEPLETED TIME, IN MOMENTS WHEN WE KNOW NOTHING BUT THE DIMNESS OF EXILE, OF NOT SEEING A WAY FORWARD, WE MUST ABANDON FEAR BECAUSE WE HAVE NOT BEEN ABANDONED.

I RECENTLY READ A STORY ABOUT A MAN WHO VOLUNTEERS WORKING ON A MINIMUM OF TWO HABITAT FOR HUMANITY HOUSES A YEAR. HE’S A GIFTED CARPENTER AND CAN GET TWICE THE WORK DONE IN HALF THE TIME IT TAKES MOST PEOPLE. SOME YEARS HE WORKS ON FIVE OR SIX HABITAT PROJECTS, BUT HE MADE BOTH GOD AND HIMSELF A PROMISE THAT HE WILL ALWAYS DO AT LEAST TWO. HE HAS HONORED THAT COMMITMENT FOR OVER THIRTY YEARS. THE MAN SERVED IN VIETNAM AND STRUGGLED TO READJUST UPON RETURNING HOME. HE HAD NO CLOSE FAMILY SO HE DRIFTED..TOWN TO TOWN, JOB TO JOB. THE ONE THING HE DID HAVE WAS A TALENT FOR CARPENTRY, SO HE COULD USUALLY FIND A BUIDLING SITE THAT NEEDED AN EXTRA HAND. FINALLY, IN A SMALL MIDWESTERN TOWN, HE SIGNED ON TO HELP BUILD A DEVELOPMENT OF SIX MODERATELY SIZED AND AFFORDABLY PRICED HOUSES. HE TOLD THE FOREMAN HE WOULD BE HAPPY NOT ONLY TO DO CARPENTRY BUT ALSO TO PROVIDE SECURITY, BRINGING HIS SLEEPING BAG WITH HIM AND SPENDING THE NIGHTS ON SITE. SO HE DID THAT, HOUSE BY HOUSE. THE OWNER OF THE COMPANY WAS IMPRESSED BY THE MAN’S ABILITIES AND COMMITMENT, ALSO AWARE THAT APPARENTLY HE HAD NO OTHER PLACE TO SLEEP. SO, AT THE CLOSE OF THE PROJECT, ALMOST A YEAR IN THE MAKING, THE BUSINESS OWNER TOOK THE MAN ASIDE AND SAID: “I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR WHAT YOU’VE DONE. AND I WANT YOU TO STAY ON WITH THE COMPANY.” THEN HE HANDED THE MAN A SET OF KEYS AND SAID: “THE SIXTH HOUSE WE BUILT IS YOURS.” “BUT I CAN’T PAY FOR IT,” THE CARPENTER SAID, TO WHICH HIS NEW EMPLOYER ANSWERED: “YOU’LL FIND A WAY.”

THE CARPENTER’S VOLUNTEER WORK IS HOW HE REPAID HIS EMPLOYER. AT LEAST TWICE A YEAR THE MAN PUTS A ROOF OVER THE HEAD OF SOMEONE WHO NEEDS IT, JUST AS HIS BOSS DID FOR HIM.

SOMEONE SPECIAL CLAIMS US, ASKING US TO STAY ON WITH THE COMPANY, TO BE PART OF THE FAMILY. AND THAT ACT OF GRACE LOVES US INTO LOVING. AS WE REMEMBER JESUS’

BAPTISM, AS WE GIVE THANKS FOR OUR OWN BAPTISMS, MAY THE LOVE OF CHRIST SETTLE INTO OUR HEARTS AS WE SHARE CHRIST WITH OTHERS.