

## You Are Loved

My mom grew up in a home where she was always left to wondering: "Am I loved?"

That question is one that haunted her for many years, and the more I have traveled about, and the more people I have met, I have come to see that my Mom's question: "Am I loved?" is probably the most common question in the world.

We human beings are so very good at many things.

We are great at organizing, building, controlling.

We are, it seems, really good at changing the world we have been given; turning fields into cities, harvesting the rich resources of the planet, finding cures for so many diseases.

But what we most of us seem to struggle with is that fundamental question: "Am I loved?"

We often struggle with receiving love, and with giving it.

Oh sure, we usually don't have a problem being nice to one another.

Politeness and good manners are everywhere to be found.

But love, that is something all together different.

Love is all about being open, and once open, being vulnerable, and once vulnerable, willing to be hurt.

It's not an easy place to go.

And yet that is precisely where God goes today, as the Son steps into the Jordan waters, as the sky is torn apart, as the separation between heaven and earth is undone, so that the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, launches from its heavenly perch, coming to roost on the young man from Galilee.

Today we celebrate the baptism of the Lord.

Now I figure that when you hear the word “baptism” your thinking immediately turns to cute babies in white who will coo or holler while getting cold water poured over their heads, while the priest tries to be sure not to drop them.

My friend Mark Anderson is so worried I’ll drop Tate, that I think he’s holding off on the baptism until Tate is tall enough to put his own head over the font!

But baptism is not about cooing or cuteness...

Remember a few weeks ago, during Advent, the prophet crying out, and your preacher preaching the plaintive cry: “O when will you tear open the heavens and come down?!”

That’s not an invitation to cute: it’s a plea for Almighty God to burst through the veil separating heaven and earth; to finally and at long last make things right.

One evening the Princeton New Testament professor was visiting a high school youth group.

The professor is speaking about the significance of Christ's baptism, that it reveals God's presence in Jesus.

One of the student’s, without looking up, says: "That’s not what it means."

Well, the professor, glad that at least the student is listening enough to disagree, asks, "What do you think it means?"

The boy replies:

"The story says that the heavens are opened, right?"

"The heavens are opened -- and the Spirit of God comes down, right?"

The boy looks up and leans forward, saying,

"It means that God is on the loose in the world.

And that's dangerous."

Dangerous -- because love is on the loose.

Frightening, ego-shattering, change-your-ways Love --- it's on the loose – right here in Palama – right where ever you live!

You see, Isaiah's dangerous cry is answered today.

Did you hear it in the gospel lesson?

Unlike Matthew and Luke, who simply recount the sky being opened, in Mark's gospel, the sky is **torn open**, and the dove – some say it is a dive-bombing dove(!) (think Jonathan Livingston Seagull) joins, right there and then, in the muddy waters of the Jordan, heaven to earth.

Just as the spirit of God hovers over the waters at the dawn of creation, to bring order out of chaos, today the Son of God enters the waters to bring all of humanity out of death into life.

One minister puts it this way:

“As Jesus goes down in the waters of the Jordan guided by John's rough hands, he is in solidarity with sinners.

Jesus' baptism mirrors his obedience to God, a call he will soon be putting in the ear of all who long to follow him.

This is the way it goes, Jesus says:

‘Wash off the old dirt, shake the dust of sin from your feet.

God is creating a new day and a new way.

Come walk with me out of darkness into the light of day.’

As a company of sinners wades into the water, they fall in line behind Jesus and together walk toward Jerusalem.

God looks at them and is very pleased.”

Baptism is God's promise to us that despite our defects, despite our simply being pains in the neck to too many people (and to our very own selves) too much of the time, despite our near habitual need to look out for number one, to be right, to be in charge: despite all of that, in the baptism of Jesus, as God takes on all that it is to be human, and joins ranks with us, and throws his lot in with us, in the baptism of Jesus, God says first to Jesus: This is my beloved with whom I am well pleased.

And as this company of sinners, who include you and you and you and me, goes into the water, and falls in line behind Jesus, God looks at all of them – at all of us – and says again:

“These are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The heart hole that so many feel all through their lives, wondering “Am I loved?” is answered today and forevermore in the miraculous gift of baptism, assuring us that we are indeed loved by the One whose love matters most of all.

Love tears the heavens open and speaks.

Perhaps, standing naked in the Jordan, it is only now that Jesus fully grasps who he really is, so that now he is ready to form us into who we really are.

The Voice that tears open the heavens that declares Jesus Beloved, affirms that we too, and all of us, are also Beloved.

And one other thing, lest we be tempted to get too spiritual in the otherworldly sense, or too theoretical or too esoteric:

The Spirit of God is always tied up tightly with the material world.

It is water and mud that Jesus stands in at his baptism; it is with dirt and spit mixed together that Jesus heals the blind man; with a touch, the hemorrhaging woman is made well; it is pieces of bread and sips of inexpensive wine that becomes the body and blood of Jesus for us each and every week.

Ever since the sky was torn open that day, the Spirit of God is now and forever on the loose and in our midst, tied up ever so tightly with the material world.

Baptism is God’s yes to each and every one of us; a yes not set high on a shelf in heaven; it is a yes that lives and breathes our day to day lives; in all of our failures, in all of our joys.

This day, to the whole world, and especially to those walking about and wondering: "Am I loved?" God says:

"You are accepted.

You are accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you do not know.

Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.

Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

Do not seek for anything; do not intend anything.

Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." Tillich.

The baptism of Jesus means that through the grace of God, all of humanity is home free.

The desert blooms, the dove descends, and you, my friends, are accepted.

Can there be any more satisfying answer to the question that too often haunts our days: "Am I loved?"

And yet, that does not end our story.

The Spirit that reminds us in Church that we are the beloved of God, that same Spirit drives us out of the church, just as it drives Jesus from the Jordan into the desert, where we too wrestle with the wild beasts of our nature, of our culture, all the while passing on to the next guy, the next gal, that they too, for all their doubts, for all their fears, are indeed the beloved of God – this

God who is open, this God who is vulnerable, this God who is willing even to die, in order to have us for himself.

Such is the meaning of baptism.

+amen

