

Epiphany 1, Year A,

12th January, 2020

Isaiah 42:1-9 NRSV / Matthew 3:13-17 NRSV



There is the story of a formerly homeless man named Mario
who now lived in a church shelter.

He had lived on the streets of New York City for half of his life.

He spent his sixtieth birthday with friends at a church dinner at the shelter.

Several people at the dinner claimed that Mario

did not appear to be sixty years old.

Responding to this comment, Mario reached into his coat pocket

to produce his birth certificate,

which showed that he was indeed sixty years old.

Mario then said, "Want to see my baptismal certificate?"

His baptismal certificate showed that he was baptized as a baby
at an Episcopal church on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

What a remarkable thing!

Why would Mario have carried his baptismal certificate with him

for all those years as he wandered the streets of Manhattan?

One could certainly understand keeping a vital identification document

such as his birth certificate close,

but what made the baptismal certificate so important to him?

In our gospel text this morning, Jesus comes to the Jordan River

to be baptized by John the Baptist.

John protests saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Our text is clear that John says this

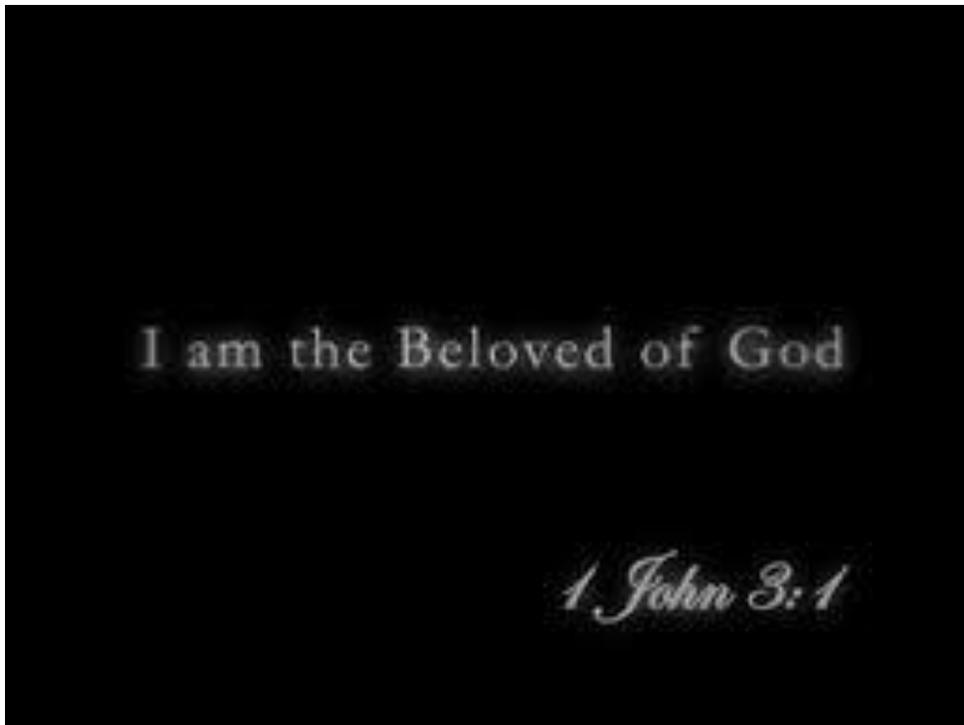
because he does not want to assume a superior position to Jesus.

Then Jesus responds, "Let it be so now;

for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

We may wonder why Jesus is so insistent to be baptized.

One clue is in the wording of his response.



Jesus responds with authority, saying, "Let it be so now."

He follows this up with an explanation of why John needs to baptize him,
to "fulfill all righteousness."

This is the fifth time in the short span of Matthew's Gospel to this point
that the verb "fulfill" has been used.

As I've talked about before, there is a very heavy connection in Matthew
in demonstrating how Jesus is the fulfillment

of the promises of the Old Testament prophets, particularly Isaiah.

But more importantly, it's just not the concept of a messiah arriving,
but of the One who will accomplish God's will and plan for humanity.

Too often we make many of these concepts, such as righteousness,
to be issues of our own personal piety.

We focus on our own behavior, or look at an upstanding person and say

“this person or that was a righteous woman or man,”

based on how their morals were reflected in their lives.

And don't get me wrong, that's important and part of being righteous.

But it's so much more than just personal piety.

The Greek word, *diakaios* from which it is derived also means justice,

the way things were meant to be,

more specifically, as planned by God, God's will.

So Jesus in saying that he needed to be baptized by John, was also acting justly,

and fulfilling God's plan.

If we were to look at all the scriptures in Isaiah

and the prophets referenced in Matthew concerning Jesus,

we would find that many of them have the theme

of setting things back to the way God intended,

or restoring God's justice to the world.

Baptism is a lot like a wedding ring.

Baptism is symbolic of the washing away of our sins.

It is also symbolic of a new way of life.

It has been said that Baptism is to the Christian faith

what the wedding ring is to a marriage.

It is a symbol.

Like the wedding ring, baptism draws a mark on the ground

between the past and the future.

Like the wedding ring, it says, "From this day forward, I stand with God."

Another, and perhaps more important clue to the answer of the question as to why it was so important to Jesus to be baptized is in the next section of our text.



Right after Jesus was baptized, “suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

And a voice from heaven said,

‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”

The baptism of Jesus reveals his identity to us, and to Jesus as well.

Jesus is the beloved Son of God.

This identity must give him comfort as he carries out his ministry,

defending himself from those who question his message and actions.

This voice must bolster him as he is later declared a criminal and crucified.

Others declare him a liar and a heretic.

God declares him to be God's beloved Son.

For many of us, we take our understanding of baptism from this text.

We understand that through God's grace,

we stand alongside Jesus as God declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved,
with whom I am well pleased."

We identify as children, as beloved daughters and sons of the Divine.

Through this identity of grace, we experience our own value,

and are motivated to see and proclaim all people to be children whom God loves.



Sadly, the reality is, as we grow, we can lose track of that heavenly voice,

and we begin to listen to other voices.

Perhaps we hear voices when we are children

through report cards that tell us we're not smart enough.

Perhaps we hear the voices of our peers that tell us we're not cool enough,
that our identity and how we express ourselves
is somehow terribly flawed.

While much awareness has been raised to the harm bullying can cause,
it's still alive and well today.

As adults, we hear voices that tell us

that we are not successful enough

or that we do not have enough money and all that money can buy.

We often hear voices through our culture and unkind media

that our bodies are not attractive enough.

Somehow as God's voice gets drowned out, we listen to those other voices,
and we are tempted to forget who we are.

We are tempted to forget that God and God's people

have claimed us as beloved children of God.

We can also be tempted to forget that God

has claimed all people as beloved children.

There are times when we forget this identity in others,

as when we encounter the homeless, perceive others as unattractive,

or interact with those we feel are less than ideal, or less than *our* ideal.

There are just as many voices that will try to drown out the Divine

to make us think less of others:

others who struggle with substance abuse,

others who struggle with a different orientation than our own,
others who don't meet up to those standards
of beauty and success the voices of our culture hold out
as the ideal.



We can imagine our friend Mario, living on the streets for those thirty years.

Passersby must have called him many things:

a bum, homeless, panhandler, worthless.

People avoided him and tried not to look at him,

something we are probably all guilty of at some point.

We have all watched as people like Mario

are declared to be undeserving by our society and our government.

Because we had a different experience than those we see as less,

we formulate our own impressions on what must be at fault in them.

We lose God's voice with God's perspective,
and lose our beloved point of view.

We forget the part our voice may have played
in adding to that chorus that derides others,
or the lack of our voice rising to lift them up
as the divine beloved children they are.

**You are a
beloved child
of God.**



We need to remember those times when we lost touch with our own status,
when those voices drowned out the divine in our own lives.

Even as others, through their actions and words declared Mario to be worthless,
he carried his baptismal certificate and his birth certificate in his pocket.

His birth certificate recalled his parents who named him out of love.

His baptismal certificate recalled the God and congregation

who loved and claimed him.

Here he was, sixty years later, sitting in a church

and having dinner with his friends.

A congregation had once again acknowledged Mario's true identity,

claimed him as one of their own, a beloved child of God,

and extended their love and care.

As we walk through our days and hear others judge us,

we need to remember God's voice at Jesus' baptism.

As we hear ourselves disparaging others, whether aloud or in our own heads,

we need to focus to listen for that heavenly voice that we would drown out,

saying "you are my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

May that also be the voice we share with others, as we see ALL as beloved by God.

Amen.