



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 1 Year C

How to Be Beloved

[RCL]: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I want to talk a bit about the Baptism of Jesus, about what it means. The place to start, of course, is with the story we just heard. We heard the first part of it just a few weeks ago. Remember how John was at the Jordan River (the place where the people of Israel crossed over into the promised land), and how he preached about repentance and judgment? He promised that the ax was lying at the root of the tree and that any useless chaff would be burned with unquenchable fire—and remember how he told people, sometimes in great detail, what to do if they wanted to live out their repentance?

It was to this place, and into this context, that Jesus came to be baptized. Now, we Christians need to remember that our basic understanding of baptism—and of our own baptism—comes from Jesus and from what happened at his baptism, and from what happened after and because of his baptism—and not from anyone else John baptized, and not from anywhere else.

The first thing I want to point out is that when Jesus was baptized, no one told him what to do. John the Baptist didn't tell him what to do—and John was truly delighted to tell absolutely everybody else, including the king, exactly what to do. But not Jesus. And God the Father didn't tell Jesus what to do, either. Notice that carefully. The Father told Jesus who Jesus was, how the Father regarded him—"You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." But there's nothing in there about what Jesus was supposed to *do*, about what it *looked like* for him to be the beloved, the uniquely named Son of the Father, about how to *live out* the identity that was revealed to him.

Jesus had to work that one out for himself, by himself. And today I want to look at some of the options and expectations that were in front of Jesus as he decided what it would mean for him to be the chosen one, to be the Messiah. Remember, Jesus was a real person who had to make real decisions, just like we do—he wasn't a puppet or God the Father in a people-suit. Jesus didn't decide what to do in a vacuum. He lived in his particular world, and that means that he was surrounded by a variety of traditions and expectations of what it meant to be the Messiah, the beloved. What's more, many of these different visions are still with us, and lots of folks are still pretending that Jesus chose one or another of these other options, and not the one that he did, in fact, choose.

After Jesus was named the beloved of the Father, here are some of the places he could have looked to determine what this meant.

First, he could have looked *up* and seen John the Baptist and stopped there. Jesus could have lived a rigid, ascetic life, ignoring or disdaining physical and social pleasures. He could have preached a rigorous moralism, worn weird clothes, eaten odd food, and promised that if you were not good, God would get you good. Jesus, like John the Baptist, could have confined his ministry to the people of Israel and waited for the wrath to come. A lot of people thought the Messiah would be like that—in fact, a lot of people thought John *was* the Messiah precisely because he did these things. Jesus could have looked there.

Or he could have looked at the headlines and the issues of the day and become an anti-Roman agitator— allied perhaps with the Zealots, who pretty much invented guerrilla warfare, or with one of the other nationalist parties. He could have organized an army and set out to restore to God's people their rightful heritage by force of arms. Many who claimed to be the Messiah or who were considered to be the Messiah did exactly that with more or less success. Jesus could have promised military victory, economic prosperity, and national greatness. This was probably the most common expectation at the time—most everybody *knew* this was what the Messiah was going to do—and this was *possible*. Within a generation, Palestine was in full military revolt against Rome. Jesus could have looked there.

Or he could have looked to the Hebrew Bible—our Old Testament—and chosen one of its many and varied images of what those books say it looks like to be the beloved of the Father. He could have gone to the Book of Kings and taken David or Solomon, the great kings of ancient Israel, as his model. They were stellar soldiers and politicians, players on the international scene, and they remained to Jesus' day symbols and constant reminders of Israel's past greatness as an independent nation and world power. People wanted those good old days back, and lots of them expected the Messiah to bring them back.

Or Jesus could have looked to the Book of Daniel and its apocalyptic vision of God's triumph, where God suddenly and unambiguously appears in history and brings one horrible trial after another on all of creation—until the evil are clearly and decisively defeated and destroyed, and the chosen are given a whole new creation as the old one passes away. This was also a popular hope among a number of small but influential religious groups that Jesus knew about and that knew about Jesus.

Or he could have turned to Haggai or another of the lesser prophets. They saw the Messiah as the one to purify Israel, to destroy the gentiles, to cleanse and perfect the temple and its sacrifices, to bring about right worship and study, and to create a racially and religiously pure community.

Those were just a few of the choices—there were lots more. All of these were popular visions of the Messiah in Jesus' day, and there were self-styled messiahs who modeled themselves on each and every one of them. In fact, these options are still with us. There are not a few who want, and who pretend, that Jesus and his Church are really all and only about preaching morality, or causing social reform, or gaining

personal prosperity, or bringing in renewed national greatness, or bringing back the good old days, or just hanging around until God brings down the whole shebang in one great explosion, or creating the perfect, pure, and isolated community—a group as homogeneous as it is holy. All of these are still around today, just like they were around for Jesus. They are all temptations for us, as they were for Jesus.

But Jesus chose none of them. Guided by that spirit he received at his baptism, Jesus *did* go to the Bible for his vision of what it meant to be the beloved of the Father, but he went to a generally ignored and fairly obscure part of the Bible—to a part no one, up until then, had much bothered with.

He went to the servant songs of the prophet Isaiah—four powerful and perplexing poems. (The part of Isaiah we just heard is right in the middle of them.) In these passages, God’s chosen one is portrayed not as a king or conqueror—but as a servant: weak, gentle, patient, and burdened with pain. He is a servant who somehow, mysteriously and through his obedient suffering, redeems not only Israel, but all of humanity.

In these passages, the servant of God, the beloved, fulfills none of the popular expectations of a messiah. Instead, he embraces a faithful obedience that leads only through great affliction to his justification and to the victory of God. It’s no accident that the Church insists that we hear these reading from Isaiah during Christmas, during Epiphany, and during Holy Week.

When Jesus came out of the waters of baptism, he was given his identity just like we are at our own baptisms—he was named beloved of God, just like we are. He had to decide where to look to discover how he was to live out that identity. There were lots of options; there still are.

On this Sunday, the Church bids us reaffirm our own Baptismal Covenant to remind ourselves that we, too, have been named beloved of God and that we, too, must live that out day by day. What does that look like? What will that look like today and for the rest of our lives? Jesus thought about this. Of all the options he could have taken, he chose the image of the suffering servant, the one who gives up everything for the sake of faithful obedience to God’s word. Today, we again choose Jesus and his vision. That is our glory and our challenge.

[Note: the liturgy for Renewal of Baptismal Vows can be found on pp. 292-293 of the Book of Common Prayer.]

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