

1/22/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Good morning, and welcome to Alexanderwohl on this beautiful wintry day. We are glad to be gathered together for worship in this space or from another warm place via Zoom, while it is cold, wet, and snowy outside.

It happens that 498 years ago yesterday, the first baptism of the Anabaptist movement took place.

Consequently, Mennonite World Conference has encouraged Anabaptist-related congregations around the world to recognize our common fellowship on this Sunday.

I wasn't aware of this when choosing the scripture passage for today, but it is fitting that it is the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry.

As we consider the meaning of Jesus' baptism, we might remember our own baptisms, if you have had that experience, or maybe anticipate your future baptism, and moreover consider the new beginnings God has for us in this new year.

[OPPORTUNITIES TIME]

CALL TO WORSHIP

This morning, we'll try something different: for the last line, I'd like to turn to someone who is next or nearby you, if they are not too far away, and speak that last line to that person. You may say it more than once for multiple people. We probably won't be in unison.

This is again from the Soil and the Seed devotional resource, that goes through the season of Epiphany.

L: Before he could even do a thing,

P: Jesus was called Beloved

L: Before the healings, before the cross, before the Resurrection,
The Lord spoke:

P: "This is my Beloved Child, in who I am well pleased"

L: Before he could even do a thing,

P: Jesus was.

L: Let us hear the Lord call us by name:
[All say to the person next to you]

All: _____, YOU ARE BELOVED OF GOD!

INVOCATION

O God,

We believe the same Spirit that descended on Jesus in the form of a dove is also operative among us. Let us receive your cleansing and your power, as we rest on the foundation of your love.

In the name of Jesus...

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Begin with video clip of Maya Angelou:

https://www.google.com/search?q=maya+angelou+god+loves+me&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS880US886&oq=ma&aqs=chrome.0.69i59j0i67j69i57j69i59j46i67j69i60l3.2201j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:f7972def,vid:oBuEIEiJpsc

You love us, God!! And we are amazed at it and grateful for it! We are humbled by it! We can do any good thing well when we are transformed by your love.

Let us hold that and ponder that for a moment...

O God, may your love be the first thing that people see in us. May your love guide us and fill us and spill out of us. May the embodiment of your love be our first order of business as we meet in two weeks to worship, eat together and have our annual meeting. We pray for other congregations who are having similar conversations in the coming weeks; bless your people as they plan and discern for this new year. Help us all to remember that your love is the foundation for who we are and what we do.

We pray for the people of China as they celebrate the New Year this weekend. So many are traveling to see loved ones; we pray for safe travels and we pray for your Holy Spirit's presence as they deal with a surge in covid illnesses and deaths. We pray for all in China who are doing your good work and doing it well by the power of your love.

We pray for your love to shine through in places around the world where people's voices are straining to be heard – where there is unrest and injustice, in Peru and Palestine. We pray for your love in places where there is hunger and hatred, in Ukraine and Somalia. We pray for your love in places where the earth itself is being destroyed, in the Brazilian rain forest and the island nations.

We pray for your Spirit of love to be present here at home, with each one of us as we live our lives – in school, at games or other events, at work and at home. We pray for those who grieve. May your love bring comfort and assurance. We pray for those who are ill. Bring your healing and relief. We pray for those who are anxious and tired. Bring your peace and some measure of joy.

We pray for your Spirit to accompany us throughout the rest of this worship time. Bring your growth and inspiration, that we may be empowered to do your will and share your love. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

We offer our financial gifts to you, God with love and gratitude. Bless these offerings that they may be used to share your love in the world. Amen.

“BELOVED OF GOD” – PASTOR CALEB

Matthew 3:13-17

INTRODUCTION

We are just a few weeks into a new year. For many of us, a year is a cycle that brings repetition of the same themes again and again – planting and harvest, the academic year and sports seasons. Perhaps other yearly rhythms of work or family life.

For others, a new year is suggestive of new beginnings. The chance for a reset. For new resolutions. For some kind of change, the start of something new.

The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River marked the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. It was originally celebrated as part of Epiphany. Everything that Jesus did as part of his ministry followed this baptism.

A number of weeks ago, we talked about John the Baptist. John the Baptist was certainly a rough-cut figure. He did not mince words as he called people to repent of their wrong behavior and participation in injustice. John began a renewal movement that was a predecessor movement to Jesus’. John baptized people in the Jordan river as a ritual of repentance for their sins.

According to the Gospels, John was a prophet preparing people for the Messiah who was to come. Matthew’s Gospel suggests that John knew who Jesus was the one, so when Jesus also appeared among the people seeking baptism, this seemed strange. It may seem strange first of all because John’s baptism was connected with confession of sins, and Jesus did not have sins to confess.

But it is even more strange because Jesus is greater than John. Jesus will baptize people with the Holy Spirit – why would he have any need of a piddly baptism in water?

We’ve talked a lot about the God’s kingdom as upside-down, and we have something upside-down already at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Instead of Jesus, as the true spiritual giant, baptizing John, Jesus comes to John for baptism.

John and Jesus have a little dialogue that only appears in Matthew’s Gospel.

John objected – “I’m the one that needs to be baptized by you!” But Jesus answers that his baptism is proper to fulfill all righteousness.

That's a strange statement. What does that mean? Some people think Jesus says this because God tells us to get baptized and Jesus is obedient to God. Some think that this is Jesus' way of identifying with ordinary people who will become righteous by trusting in him.

The most likely meaning is that Jesus understands his baptism as the **ritual of initiation** for the special role that God has given him. By being baptized, Jesus is following God's call on his life.

Jesus will live as the righteous one, who expresses God's justice to humans in the way that he lived and died. Jesus goes before us.

When followers of Jesus get baptized, our baptisms are both different and similar than Jesus'.

Different, because we are not the Messiah, nor do we receive the Holy Spirit in the same way, for the same task. Unlike Jesus, our own baptisms are connected with repentance and with rebirth.

But baptism also serves as the **ritual of initiation** for us to. The marker of the beginning of a life-long journey of following after Jesus. God identified with us through Jesus, so that we could follow in the path that Jesus took into a new humanity.

We too become God's beloved children, and together become what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community – a community that undoes the evils of racism, violence, oppression, and inequality, where we equally bear the image of God.

[SLIDE: MATT REGIER'S IMAGE]

This image of Jesus' baptism is by Matt Regier who lives in Mattfield Green. It is a linocut, which means it is cut out of a linoleum block, which is then used to make prints. I believe the white part is what he would have carved out of the linoleum. This image is also in our hymnal as number 445.

It is a beautiful image. Jesus seems serene and composed. He is gazing up to heaven and has his hands open, perhaps open to the world, or maybe receptive to what God's calling will be.

You can see the dove in the upper-right corner. The one detail that is in all four gospels is the dove. The gospel of John doesn't record the baptism itself, but does mention the dove.

What an interesting picture for the empowering of the Holy Spirit. A dove suggests hope – after all it was a dove that Noah sent out from the ark that brought back an olive leaf, showing that the waters were receding.

If the Holy Spirit was the power of Jesus, a dove seems like a strange symbol of that power. It is suggestive of a different kind of power than conventional power.

Underneath the image are what look like random letters. This is what the ancient upper-case Greek manuscripts of the New Testament look like, with no spaces between the words. The letters say, "This is my Son, the Beloved."

The bedrock of Jesus' ministry is that he is God's beloved. God is pleased with him, takes delight in him, has chosen him.

That might not seem remarkable. But notice where in Jesus' life this approval comes.

- Jesus has not yet passed the test of a forty-day fast and temptations in the desert.
- Jesus has not yet done any healing.
- Jesus has not yet forgiven anyone's sins.
- Jesus has not yet preached in the synagogue or taught along the shore of the Sea of Galilee.
- Jesus has not yet challenged the political and religious authorities.
- Jesus has not yet overturned the money-changer tables in the temple.
- Jesus has not yet trod the road of suffering to the cross.
- Jesus has not yet risen from the grave.

And yet, Jesus has God's love and approval.

Any building has a foundation that supports the weight of the building. A poor foundation may not cause problems right at first, but cracks will eventually form. It is not easy to shore up a poor foundation.

The foundation of any life of following Jesus is to receive this same love and approval of God from the beginning. When we try to earn love and approval, from God, from others, even from ourselves, our foundation will last a time, but will eventually show cracks.

We need to know in our bones that we too are God's beloved and God's chosen, even before we have done anything.

It's not to say there isn't other forms of growth that we may need in our lives. We will still have to put forth effort, and push forward through challenges. But the spiritual life can only be built on the foundation of God's love. The load is lighter and sustainable, only when everything we do is built on the foundation of being secure in God's love and approval.

It is when we try to earn approval, or when we think we are owed approval – and therefore are better than others – that our foundation inevitably will crack, and threaten everything that is built on top.

Last week, David Boshart mentioned the Anabaptist concept of *gelassenheit*. This is a German word meaning serenity or calm.

In Anabaptist spirituality, according to Don Clymer, it means yieldness to God's will, or even self-surrender, and self-abandonment. That is only possible when we are secure in God's love.

Gelassenheit is not apathy or lack of commitment or lack of energy. The idea is neither that God does all the work, nor that we do all the work. Rather, the theological idea is synergy. Synergy means "working together." This is what our loving and relational God desires. To work with, in, and through imperfect human beings.

At his baptism, Jesus received the power and commissioning of the Holy Spirit for the work that he would do.

We are not Jesus, of course. But if in some sense we follow in the same path, then God's love must be the foundation of what we do, and who we know ourselves to be.

NEW BEGINNINGS

The new year brings the opportunity to think about new beginnings and any needed resets.

Most people don't remember a lot Junior High Social Studies. I remember just a few details of my teacher, Mr. Schipanski, who came from Canada and taught American Civics.

I remember him repeatedly saying, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

He meant that to be quirky, I think. I can't trace the origin of that phrase. It is not a terrible philosophy – "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." We aren't going to go back to yesterday, and to live in the present is to approach each day with the curiosity and openness of a first day.

If you are already baptized, let this be a time to remember your baptism as you look to the new year. In the gifts that we bring to the ministry of Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, and in the work that we do together, let us approach it as a new beginning, built on the foundation of God's love and approval.

At his baptism, Jesus heard these words:

"You are my Son, whom I love. In you I am well-pleased." (The words are reported in the third person in Matthew, but are in the second person ("you") in both Mark and Luke.)

I have adapted these words into a simple prayer of receiving these words from God:

"You're my son. I love you. You are enough."

If this sounds familiar, it is because I have mentioned this practice several before. I think that it is not a bad thing to mention again. I received this idea from a book entitled, *Flee, Be Silent, Pray* by Ed Czerwinski.

This may not be quite what you'd think of as a prayer, because it is not the words one would say to God, but words we receive from God to us. In my mind, this too is prayer.

Now maybe it might seem a little forward to think that the words spoken to Jesus the Messiah could somehow apply to anyone else. Certainly, Jesus was addressed at his baptism as one specially chosen.

But the witness of the New Testament as a whole, and the way that Jesus commissions his own disciples makes clear that not only is it appropriate for us to receive these words for ourselves, but that it is spiritually essential. In fact, to not do so is spiritual death, and the root of our violence.

To know ourselves as God's beloved can only mean recognizing the same is true of others. This knowledge is incompatible with prejudice or justification of oppression.

PRACTICES

How do we ground ourselves in this knowledge? We will need practices for doing so. Many of you may already have such practices. And in any case, we each have to find practices that work for us.

Here are three ideas.

1. Meditate on God's words:
 - You're my son/daughter.
I love you.
I'm pleased with you/You're enough
2. Write on a piece of paper: "*I am God's beloved*" or the words above
 - Put it where you will see it or carry it with you
 - Visualize God going with you in all that you do
3. Think about the coming day. Imagine it is your first day as a newly commissioned Jesus-follower. At the end of the day, review the day. Did this practice change your focus for the day? And if so, how?

May God grant us a new beginning in this new year, assure us of our belovedness, and teach us to follow the path that Jesus forged for us.

BENEDICTION

May God grant you a new beginning; today, this week, and in the coming year.

May God grant you to know that you are beloved and are part of the beloved community.

May all that you do and believe be built on the foundation of God's unearned love.