

The First Sunday
after the Epiphany

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Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about her Grandmother Lucy. Lucy was a very strange looking woman. She had lost both her legs to diabetes and had wooden stumps where limbs should be. Her weak eyes demanded that she wear dark glasses. Most of the time, she looked like a disabled bomber pilot. But to her granddaughters, she was wonderful.

Whenever Barbara would visit her grandmother, grace would abound. In the closet would be wrapped packages enough for a surprise each day of the visit. The meals were delicious always with a favorite dessert. Then there were the shopping trips to buy dresses and new hair bows.

But, the best part of these visits was the baths. Each night Grandma Lucy would draw a hot bath filled with suds, and with her big sponge she would polish Barbara's skin.

Then, following the bath she would anoint her granddaughter's body with Jergen's lotion all the way down to the soles of her feet. The perfect ending would be the Evening in Paris dusting powder when Lucy would tickle her granddaughter with a pale blue powder puff. Barbara writes: "When Grandma Lucy was done, I knew that I was precious. I was absolutely convinced that I was loved and nothing has happened since to shake that conviction (*The Preaching Life*, p. 17).

Fond memories of being loved and cherished by someone wonderful like this are treasures to have. But even if we've never had this kind of treasure, Baptism is where all of us meet perfect Love. Baptism is where all of us are bound in love and trust to the One who loves us most of all.

If you have ever wondered if God is a mean God or a merciful God—if you have ever worried that God may blast us instead of bless us—if you have ever thought that God is a God of law more than a God of Love—today's gospel alleviates our confusion.

The Voice of God speaks clearly to us today. But unlike the megaphone Voice of Hollywood renown, this Voice is warm and welcoming. "You are my Son, the Beloved One; with you I am well pleased." This assurance *is* God's greatest gift to us.

Listen to today's gospel: In those days...with these words Mark points straight to Jesus as the one who is to come. The early followers of Jesus would have recognized instantly that after the words, "In those days" a promise Of God's deliverance would follow.

This is how the prophets of old announced the news that God's mercy was at hand and on this day at the river Jordan, God was about to tear open the barrier between humanity and God's love once and for all. Mark tells us that just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, 'he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him."

Now, as popular, soft and fuzzy religious art would have us picture this scene-- we could envision Heaven as a bright blue sky filled with puffy white clouds gently parting as a white dove dives toward the earth, coming to rest straight over Jesus' head.

But the image Mark paints for us is much more powerful than that. In the Greek the word we translate as "the heavens torn apart" is where we get the word schism.

Listen to that..."God made a schism in the heavens. God ripped open the fabric of human history to deliver words that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, fell soft and sweet as a dove into Jesus' ears, "You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

And Mark will use this word one more time in his gospel and that is at Jesus' death when the curtain of the Temple is torn in two and all that separates us from God as invisible, unknowable or punishing is rent asunder forever.

Today we are reminded that God is not out there, far away and inaccessible. What Jesus sees in his vision is a brief glimpse into a reality that goes beyond the one that the world offers. It's, as one of my favorite theology professors used to say, a glimpse into the *really* real. We think the world in its brokenness is our true reality.

But, in moments like this, we are offered a momentary glimpse of a different reality—a reality that is just as present to us should we decide to reach out and grasp it and hold onto it as the deeper truth of our lives.

To the man knee deep in the muddy waters of the Jordan, to this Son who has become a servant, and to all of us-- God speaks. Even before Jesus has done anything noteworthy or worthwhile, God praises him.

God affirms that Jesus is precious, that he is unique, that he is loved...not for what he *does* but for whom he is. In this baptism scene, God echoes the divine delight and pleasure that was expressed in the very beginning days of creation. ¹

After the creation of the sea and the dry land, God said, "It is good." After the creation of the light and the dark, the star and sun and moon, God said, "It is good." After the creation of the birds and the animals, the plants and the trees and the fish of the sea, God said, "it is very good." And after the creation of man and woman in God's image, God said, "it is good. It is very, *very* good."

And after the baptism of Jesus, which I think is about his total immersion into the human condition, God says, "This is good. This is delightful. This is the Beloved, who brings me great pleasure. This is very, very good." ---So it is with each one of us when we are baptized. We too are blessed as the Beloved. We too bring pleasure to God.

If you are not yet baptized, fear not, today is not about making you feel excluded. You too are deeply beloved of God; of this you must have no doubt. Baptism is simply when we or, if we are infants, the community of faith on our behalf, claims our inheritance as children of God. We all share in this inheritance. In the end it is up to us to claim it and live into it with all we're worth.

The Greek word for baptism means: "To dip, to immerse, to submerge—and my favorite—to saturate." Baptism is, for all of us the bath of the Beloved, when God takes pleasure in saturating us—saturating us with water, saturating us with grace, saturating us with blessing.

Jesus' baptism mirrors for us our original blessing—a blessing we might have forgotten we ever received. As one writer has said--- Jesus' baptism is a blessing that encourages us to become servants of love—to become a people that *offer* blessing and not judgment to others.

And despite the fact that we remain partial, broken, fragile, imperfect people, our original *blessing* can empower us---if we remember--- that we are God's children, God's Beloved.

And when we know ourselves as God's beloved, when we truly grasp that God in Christ has named us and claimed us as Beloved forever, it will be impossible for us not to see in each other the same Beloved-ness.

It is through the saturation, blessing, and belonging given in Baptism that we not only become the beloved—It is then that we are all made one by God's love to actually go out and become love in the world.

Every time we celebrate a Baptism, we are reminded of *our* original blessing—reminded of the waters that have washed over our own lives. And we are reminded that the Holy Spirit bears God's voice to *our* hearts saying, "You are my child, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.

Remember your baptism, remember that you are lovingly marked as Christ's own forever---- and if you are not yet baptized—anticipate the day with great joy and longing.

Remember that you are blessed. Remember that you belong. Remember that- you-are- the- beloved. And know that it is a gracious God that has taken delight and pleasure in who you are and in who you are becoming. This profound gift changes us. This profound Gift defines us. This profound gift is what we have to share with the world.

In this Light how can we do anything else but offer this blessing to others? How can we do anything else but welcome and name all the others who are beloved as well—to give to others a sense of belonging in God's family.

Every single living soul, and I repeat--- *everyone* is invited to claim their inheritance as God's sons and daughters. This is the Gift of this holy day. This is the Good News of this day. This is the call of this day. And it is very, very good. Amen.

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¹ Susan Andrews