

Belonging and Beloved©**Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 January 13, 2019****Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates**

Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus as we begin a focus on Jesus' life and ministry – a three-year ministry that begins with his baptism at age 30, and ends at the cross.

Actually, that's not quite true. Of course, it ends with resurrection and Jesus' appearances after his resurrection and then his ascension into heaven.

Well, that's not quite true either, is it? Because it leads then to Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit upon disciples. Yes, that's a more likely ending of Jesus' ministry.

But wait, we have all the stories of the disciples and the Apostle Paul out in the world starting churches, leading people to belief in Christ as Lord. I guess that's where Jesus' ministry ends.

People have wondered, over the years, why Jesus would have been baptized. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, preached about repentance of sin and baptism for forgiveness. But Jesus was without sin, the bible tells us. So, why would he need to be baptized?

We describe the sacraments – communion and baptism – as outward, visible signs of an inward, invisible grace that God gives us.

While I think baptism is about grace, in spite of our being sinful humans, I don't think baptism is just about forgiveness. Baptism is about belonging. In baptism we are named and claimed as a beloved child of God. We are part of the family of God. Baptism is about relationship – and a commitment to participate in the family.

I've had the honor of baptizing quite a few people over my 22 years of being a minister. I've had the joy of baptizing mostly infants, which is a wonderful thing in itself. But the ones that stand out the most – mainly because they have been different – are the baptisms of older children, or of adults.

It is one of the most moving experiences for me to have a grown man or woman kneeling in front of me to be baptized. They look up at me and there are always tears in their eyes. You can see how much it means to them and thus, it moves me almost to tears as well.

I've had one opportunity to baptize by immersion, which, growing up as a Baptist I find very meaningful indeed. In the church in Kansas where I served before coming to Holly, there was a family who had intentionally waited for their children to be baptized. They wanted them to decide when they were ready and how they wanted to be baptized. These children were exceptionally knowledgeable about the bible because every night their dad would teach them a bible lesson – a time their family called *Word of the Lord*.

So, when Laura was 12, and Emily was 10, they asked to be baptized by immersion. Of course, there was no baptismal pool in the Presbyterian Church so we either would have to go to a neighboring church or go to the lake. They chose the lake.

The day we went, it was pouring down rain, which it had been doing all week long. I was worried that there wouldn't be many of our members there at the lake as we had to travel a little distance to get there and the weather was terrible. But when we arrived, there were at least 50 people already there, in the picnic shelter, the charcoal grill was started for the cookout we were going to have after the baptism.

We suddenly had a little break in the rain so we prepared to go into the water. I had borrowed white baptismal robes from the Baptists and we slid down the muddy bank of the lake making those robes quickly not look too white.

Because in baptism we are recognizing how much we are all part of one family, we only ask for the first and middle given names of those being baptized.

Emily, the youngest, told me before we went into the water, that she was a little nervous and that she was just going to do everything her older sister, Laura did.

Laura was going first. So, Bill – our elder – helped Laura to come out to me in the water. Now I had lots of lifetime Presbyterians, many of whom had never seen a baptism by immersion, telling me before hand how they thought I should do the baptisms. Or more truthful, how they thought I should *not* do it.

You know how, when I baptize from the font, I put water on the head three times. I say I baptize you in the name of the Father (pouring water) and the Son (pouring more water) and the Holy Spirit (even more water that by now is running down their face a little).

So, they instructed me that I should not dunk them under three times. Or hold them under the water while I named the Trinity. But of course, having witnessed many baptisms by immersion and experiencing it myself, I knew what to do and what not to do.

I asked Laura what her Christian name is and she answered: Laura Elizabeth. I had her hold a handkerchief up to her nose, arms folded cross her chest. I had one hand placed firmly on her crossed arms and held my other hand up over her head, while I said 'Laura Elizabeth, I baptized you in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.' Then I put that hand on her back and gently pushed her under the water and raised her back up. It was very meaningful! Laura Elizabeth was baptized.

Then it was Emily's turn. As 10 year old Emily started out through the water, one of her flip flops came off and started floating away. She began batting at it, trying to catch it but was actually pushing it further and further. She began giggling more and more (as girls tend to do) until she was a little out of control. Her mother told her to let the flip flop go, she didn't need it. But still Emily could not stop laughing.

So, I went to her and put my hand on her shoulder and, looking in her eyes, solemnly asked, "What is your Christian name?" And Emily, suddenly getting very serious and remembering that she was going to do everything Laura did, promptly answered: Laura Elizabeth!

Emily gave me her sisters name as her name! Immediately she looked stunned and then we all – 50 plus who were there at the banks of the baptismal waters – started laughing. We giggled and

laughed with joy through the rest of that baptism and all through the picnic. It was a day to remember forever.

And I had the privilege of telling them both that they are a child of the covenant – that they are sealed by the Holy Spirit and they belong to God. The Holy Spirit was there that day, just as the Holy Spirit was present when Jesus was baptized in the waters of the Jordan River. Luke says the Spirit came like a dove and hovered over Jesus and the voice of God was heard saying “This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.”

It was a recognizing of Jesus as the Son of God but also as a part of the human family. He was there in the crowd, waiting his turn to do what others were doing, joining in with humanity, relating to us as He walked into those waters. The only difference was that He was truly not a sinner but He was the one who would save humans from our sin.

In a way, it was demonstrating the love and promise that God gave Israel through the prophet Isaiah – the Scripture we heard earlier. Israel was in captivity. God had allowed them to be taken as exiles into Babylonia because of their sin. But, in spite of their sinfulness, God proclaims that He will always be with them, through all their trials and hardships. God says they are precious in His sight and that they belong to Him.

And Jesus comes into the crowd of sinners. *When you walk through the waters*, says Isaiah, *I will go with you. They will not overtake you.* Jesus walks into the waters and so we follow Him, trusting that He will be with us, that we are precious in His sight, that we too are beloved, and that we belong.

But seriously. What does belonging mean, really? What difference does it make to us here in this life to be beloved, besides a warm, fuzzy feeling?

Well, as a pastor, I can just tell you that I’ve been with many people who are wading through those rough waters and are feeling like they just might be overwhelmed. People who are losing everything financially for numerous reasons. And they are afraid. Afraid they will lose their homes and that they and their children will be homeless.

I have been at the bedside of many people who were in their last hours of life and they needed to be reassured that God was walking with them and they would not be overwhelmed.

When I worked as a hospital chaplain in the pediatric bone marrow unit, three children died in my last week there, and their families were devastated, but all of these were also clinging to the hope and promise that they are not walking through those waters alone.

It is fitting that we go through water – literally or symbolically, in baptism, don’t you think? Because water can be so frightening, or it can be so soothing. The water of baptism represents God’s presence given to us in the man named Jesus – you know the one – the one they called Emmanuel (God with us). And in that we are promised that we too – just like him – are beloved and that we belong to the family.

Baptism is a celebration – of life in Christ’s family, of grace and forgiveness, of new life. It is a promise of God always with us in sorrow and fear and joy.

And it is a celebration of family. A joyful, glad celebration. How could we forget the most recent baptism right here in this room. On December 23rd, Holden Hanson was baptized. Holden, who is about a year and a half, is the great grandson of Beth Dryer, the grandson of Gordie and Peggy Dryer and the son of Colin and Lauren Hanson.

He came with resistance. It was getting late and he was enjoying a snack. He did not like being bound up in his father's arms while I went through all the formalities of our churches liturgy. He started squirming and protesting louder and louder.

I have to say, I suddenly felt the Holy Spirit take me by the shoulders and shake me a little. I put down my book before I barely got started and drew Holden's attention to the water, asking if he would like to touch it. Of course he wanted to touch it. And splash in it.

And when I started baptizing him, Holden helped. He began putting water on his own head. And smiling and laughing. His hair was so wet and water was on his face and he was having a great time, as was I!

Holden's baptism was a real celebration of being beloved and of belonging to God; of being precious in God's sight; of being a part of the family of God.

Jesus was baptized at the beginning of his ministry. He went into the waters, joining us all in our humanity – in our sorrows but oh, yes! In our joys as well.

So, when did his ministry actually end? Was it at the cross? Or the resurrection? Was it after his ascension to heaven, or was it in the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? Did it end after the early church was established, with the work of the Apostles?

No. The fact is, as long as we continue following Christ into the waters of baptism, receiving God's grace and blessing, committing to a life of dedication and love for service and faith; as long as we continue making new disciples Jesus' ministry never ends.

At baptism, we are asked (or our parents respond for us until we're older) to profess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We follow him – through the waters, through the every day trials, through laughter and tears – until he finally returns. Then, and only then will Jesus' ministry be ended.

Brothers and sisters, believe the good news. In Jesus Christ, you are his heirs. You too, are beloved and you belong to his family.

Thanks be to God!