

## **Baptized to be a Blessing**

Isaiah 42:1-12, Matthew 3:11-17

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Who are you?

Not just your name, which may or may not tell us anything about you, but *who are you*: what is your identity.

Not talking about race or gender or national origin, which is so often how we describe ourselves. Not talking about what your body looks like or what job you do or who your family is.

I'm talking about the identity within you that guides how you think and act and how you interact with others. The deepest beliefs and understandings of the world that guide you. What identity moves you through the world?

And even more, how do you know who you are? Do you get that info from doing a 23 and me genetic search? Or going to Ancestry.com? Or from what other people tell you that you need to be, or who they say you're not? Or from media of any kind that seeks to shape you, sometimes literally?

And have you ever really taken time to think about this?

At Jesus baptism, what happened is that his identity was confirmed and revealed: "This is my Son, Beloved, who gives me such joy." That was God speaking. Some Bible Scholars think that this is when Jesus first understood who he was fully; who knows what Mary and Joseph told him about his birth and the prophecies. But now, everything was clear and he knew who he was and what he needed to do in the world.

Then, of course, the Spirit sent him into the desert, where the Tempter tried to make him into someone else, to tell him his identity was to be a magic-making, superhero dictator. Jesus had to figure out who he was and *who he was not* as he began his ministry.

When John the Baptist talked about Jesus coming, he said that Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit and a fire that would burn away whatever within us was foreign to who we are as beloved children of God. That baptism would not only confirm our identities, but seek to shape them so we lived our lives as beloved children of God, moving through the world always with that in mind. Casting aside anything or anyone that tempted

us to move through the world in a different way, especially in ways harmful to ourselves or others.

Baptism is meant to confirm in us our identity. The theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber writes that identity is always God's first move. "God has named and claimed us as God's own. But almost immediately, other things try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong." (*Pastrix*, p. 139) The late writer Rachel Held Evans wrote that when we make the baptismal promises, especially the one about "renouncing the power of evil and receiving the freedom of new life in Christ," what we are really doing is saying this: "I am a beloved child of God and I renounce anyone or anything who says otherwise." (Searching for Sunday, p. 20)

When we baptize a child or adult, we use the names they have been given by others but not their last name. That's on purpose. What we are saying here is that though they belong to a family that bears that name, in the act of baptism they are being given an additional, actually a prior, family name: Christian. Their primal identity is as a beloved child of God, and in being connected to a Christian faith community, they are allowing Jesus to continue to work of getting rid of what interferes with them living out that identity (getting rid of the unnecessary chaff that surrounds the wheat) and encouraging them on to be all that God asks of and imagines for them, to bear fruit.

So often I interact with people who have lost that primal identity as a beloved child of God because others have convinced them they are someone else. Sometimes they have been convinced they are worthless, or less than, or unredeemable, or unforgivable. Sometimes they have been convinced that the only way they can survive in this world is to live only for self and take whatever they can get no matter the cost. Sometimes they have been convinced that they must use force, physical or emotional, to prove they are strong and worthwhile. Sometimes they have allowed the tempter to convince them to amass the wealth and power of the world, everyone else be damned.

Sometimes I forget who I am and get lost in thinking I am never enough or I am alone or I am an enormous disappointment. I think this amnesia about our true identity happens to many of us.

So, who are you? I know for a fact that you are a beloved child of God. You are baptized to receive blessing and to be blessing. We come here to remember that, to reclaim it when we are lost, to turn to Jesus to cast away whatever interferes with us living fully as a beloved child of God. As Connie Schultz quotes her mother saying, church is where we go "to fix ourselves and help others."

Holy Spirit. Fire. Extravagant Love. Baptism reminds us every time that we are beloved children of God. Let us be who we are. Amen.