

Sermon: Dive Deep

Year A, Baptism of the Lord

[Isaiah 42:1-9](#); [Psalm 29](#); [Acts 10:34-43](#); [Matthew 3:13-17](#)

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Within the church, baptism is a sacrament, a sacred act. While Protestants and Catholics have differing lists of sacraments, we all agree that we are baptized because Jesus was. In today's reading from Matthew which we used as the call to worship, we see him baptized. In today's reading from Acts, we hear Peter, the rock on which Jesus built the church, describe Jesus' baptism. It certainly threw John the Baptist for a loop when Jesus asked to be baptized; John thought Jesus should baptize *him*. Jesus was the Messiah. The anointed leader of his people. The one they had waited for for so long.

The reading from Isaiah really echoes with that longing. The book of Isaiah was written down during the exile in Babylon. Six hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Israelites had been conquered, the capitol and wealth seized, their sacred Temple destroyed and the holy objects carried back to Babylon in triumph. Part of the Babylonian's innovation in warfare was to take whole peoples into exile, to take them back to Babylon and send more peaceful and obedient families to live on the conquered land. That way the Babylonians could control the new territory with much smaller armies, since the chance of rebellion was so much smaller.

So the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. Their livelihoods were gone. The laws they had obeyed had been washed away. All the mechanisms for keeping their traditions alive, all the cohesion that the Temple had provided was gone. They had to eat weird food. And their children were making friends and maybe even marrying some of these conquering foreigners. Everything was just wrong. There was no more center to their lives.¹ Their orbits were all wobbly and everything felt like it was going to spin apart in the next minute.

Haven't we all been there? We can all think of the big moments. When we lose someone we love, someone we've worshiped with for years. When we get fired, or our kid has his heart broken, or our grandkid gets into way more trouble than she knows how to get out of. We know those moments. And mostly we accept them. But what about the small moments. When we are standing in the kitchen after work and it just is too much to ask to make a salad to go with the frozen lasagna in the oven. When we are staring at that path and thinking if we have to shovel it one more time... It's like the salad or the snow has become the center of my world and how is that even possible. I certainly did not sign up to have something so trivial be the center of my life. And yet right now, it seems to be the only thing left.

If you show up with a message of hope when I am in that kitchen or standing in that doorway with my shovel, you better be careful. Because I know it's not the salad or the snow that is the problem. It's the 37 other things that came before it. They're what's kicking me in the teeth. They're what's making my center evaporate and my world shimmy.

That's why the message from Isaiah is so beautiful. It reminds these lost and hurting people that the Center is still there. They may need to bring all sorts of resources to bear to find it again, to

¹ Richard S. Ward "Baptism of the Lord, Homiletical Perspective, Isaiah 42:1-9" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 219 & 221.

feel it again, but with imagination, inspiration, tradition, the Center they thought was gone will reveal itself again.² *I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon.* (Isaiah 42:6-7)

For John too, the world had lost its center. He was calling people to be baptized in the Jordan River, just about as far away from the center of Israel as you could get and still be in Israel.³ He was preparing the way for someone more important to come after him and re-establish the center of the life of the people of Israel. And there is Jesus, the one they had been waiting for, the Center who had been sent by the Center. Jesus asks John to baptize him and when John freaks out (and who wouldn't) Jesus reassures him, *it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.* (Matthew 3:15). And so we are baptized for the same reason he was, to fulfill all righteousness, to be in right relationship with God.

And what is that right relationship? *This is my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.* (Matthew 3:17) That's just the way God is. God loves us. God swoops down over us and loves us. It's not something we have any control over at all. It's just the way God is. The sky is blue and water is wet and God loves us. It's just in God's nature.⁴

Like Jesus, we leave the water of baptism and head into the wilderness where we encounter temptation. But unlike Jesus, it is in our nature to forget that we are beloved of God. It seems to be in our nature to make God seek us again and again. We lose our center, our lives shudder and seem to be about to spin out of control and we're terrified and trying to remember how to turn into the slide. We are so convinced that we have control over whether God loves us or not. That's part of our nature. We hide out here in the wilderness and the Holy Spirit comes after us like a dove⁵ seeking the seeds it most craves.

So when we are at that point when our center seems all wrong, seems to be missing altogether, we need to dive deep into our baptism. Remember that we are beloved of God. That God is well pleased. That you need to do nothing more than Jesus did. Remember that truth that you cannot change and then do *good and heal all who are oppressed* (Acts 10:38). We need to summon our resources, all our imagination, inspiration, tradition, to clear out all the stuff that's keeping us from feeling our Center. Dive deep into your baptism and remember the love that is at the center of creation.

² Ward, 221.

³ Raymond R. Roberts, "Matthew 3:1-12." *Interpretation* 59, no. 4 (2005): 396.

⁴ Anna Carter Florence, "Baptism of the Lord," in *Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence: Reflections on the Gospel Readings (2016-2017) Revised Common Lectionary*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2016), 24.

⁵ Carter