

“Anointed by the Spirit”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 3:13-17

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 42:1-4

A homeless guy from the neighborhood came to the church the other week asking for help getting cleaned up so he could start work. He needed a razor and nail clippers. Simple enough to provide, which I did, along with some warm gloves since his new job would have him working outside.

Getting cleaned up is an important part of starting a new chapter in life. As I thought about that while contemplating today’s New Testament scripture, it dawned on me that Jesus at his baptism was starting a new chapter of his life.

Some 2,000 years ago, Jesus came to John the Baptizer at the Jordan River to fulfill all righteousness through his baptism, through being washed in a ritual of purity and cleansing. My hope for our friend from the neighborhood is that he takes this as an opportunity to begin with a clean slate and get a new start, to transform his life for the better. I have this hope for him precisely because of what we heard read today about Jesus’ baptism. Looking at the baptism of Jesus, we learn some important things about getting a new start.

First, we learn that our destiny is not of our own choosing. Matthew tells us that Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan. But this didn’t just happen by chance. John and Jesus were destined to meet, from before they were born, from the time Mary the mother of Jesus met with John’s mother, Elizabeth, and their two unborn babies stirred inside them, being so close to one another.

Thirty years go by, and Jesus comes near to John again. He comes to be baptized by John and John says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Turns out, John has one idea of his place in life and God has quite another. John knows himself to be a faithful servant of God, and he’s pretty sure how that’s going to play out – “prepare the way of the Lord.” So as Jesus draws near to him, John is ready to turn things over to the Lord, letting Jesus do the baptizing. But instead, Jesus looks to John in fulfilling his destiny, in commencing his earthly ministry.

Likewise, Jesus looks to us. We’re going about our lives doing the best we can at whatever it is we’re supposed to be doing, and here comes Jesus wanting to use us for God’s plan and purpose, regardless of how we feel about it or how we see things playing out. You may feel destined for something entirely different from what you’re doing right now. You may feel that your life was supposed to have turned out differently. You may have a vision of what life will be like as you grow and change over the years.

No matter how we look at things, God always has a clearer vision of how things should be. And often, it's quite different from what you're imagining. Our destiny as followers of Christ is not of our own choosing. God will use us in surprising and wonderful ways.

When John first saw that things were not going as he envisioned, Matthew tells us "John would have prevented" Jesus from being baptized by him. But Jesus answers him, saying, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." "... Proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Did you catch that? Jesus puts the "us" in the righteousness of God. God's plan and purpose is fulfilled through us. We must work hand-in-hand with God as we live into our destiny, our calling as followers of Christ.

In other words, we are called to be an instrument of God's work, the hands and feet and heart of Jesus. Just as Jesus needed John's baptism to fulfill God's vision, so God needs us. Just as John was open to reimagining his role in life, we, too, must be open to new things, open to going where the Lord is calling us, fulfilling our role in the ministry and mission of the Lord. Of course, that's easier said than done. It's hard to imagine yourself as instrumental in God's grand plan.

Some people feel they don't have what it takes to follow where Jesus would lead them. Others struggle to hear what Jesus is saying as they stand at the crossroads of life. Still others have strayed so far from the Lord that they feel there's no turning back – they're too far gone, there's nothing they can contribute, whatever God has in mind for this world will just have to come about on its own, without them.

And yet, God never looks upon anyone – not you or anyone else – without seeing a glimpse of his vision coming into focus. If you remember nothing else from today, remember that God created you with the fullness of his vision in sight. God has bestowed upon you the gifts and talents and passion needed to fulfill your role in God's grand plan, even if you can't see it right now.

Sometimes, it's only in looking back on life that we see those pivotal moments when we stood at the crossroads with Jesus. Take Jesus-life as an example. After his baptism, after his time in the wilderness, Jesus returns to Nazareth in Galilee and everything comes full circle. He's standing in the temple, they hand him the scroll and he turns to the Isaiah passage and says:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."

Here, Jesus is referring back to his baptism, when the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, everything comes together for Jesus through his baptism. Likewise, the Spirit of God comes to us like a dove, a dove promising a new beginning. You can think of it like the dove that greeted Noah after the flood, carrying an olive branch as a symbol of a bright new future. Despite our fears and reservations, God is preparing a bright future for those who come alongside the Lord.

The Spirit of God descending upon Jesus is also a reminder of the Spirit of God moving over the waters at the time of creation. In the beginning, God spoke creation into existence, and here God's word reveals Jesus as the one who renews creation, through his life, death and resurrection.

In Christ, we are a new creation, full of potential as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Matthew tells us that "when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him ... and a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" We, too, are found pleasing to God in our identity as followers of Christ.

Each day is a day to thank God for the gifts, talents and passion to discover and fulfill our role in God's plan, our identity as someone chosen by God to fulfill a special calling.

Bottom line is, our calling – our future – is not based on what we've done in the past or what we imagine for ourselves in the future. It's not based on dreams fulfilled or regrets suffered. Our calling is based on our identity as a follower of Christ, and what we do with that today. Your destiny is based on what you do with identity as a follower of Christ today, and everyday.

When you think of your identity, what comes to mind – mother, father, aunt or uncle, son or daughter? When you look back on your role in life, how do you measure up?

Regardless of where such questions take you, know that when God looks upon you – through your love of God and faith in Jesus – God's voice comes from the heavens, saying, "This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

I invite you to start each day with that certainty in mind, with those words in your heart. You are beloved of the Lord. That is your identity, that is your destiny. And living into that is the pathway to a fruitful and blessed future for you and for all the world. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us pray:

Creator, Liberator, Redeemer God, we pray for your people everywhere, that your worldwide church might be the beacon of hope and grace you intend.

Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for our international leaders, that they might work together for the common good of all peoples.

Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for relief agencies and agents working to alleviate suffering. Protect and sustain them by your mercy.

Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for peacekeepers and peace negotiators, that their work may bear fruit in troubled places.

Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for all who are sick and displaced, for refugees and those fleeing violence, and for those who are grieving. Deliver your comfort, healing and grace to all in need.

Lord, hear our prayer.

In you, Lord, we put our trust, for your steadfast love never fails.

We pray with the assurance of your presence with us here and throughout the world over. We pray using the words that you taught us, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**