First Sunday after the Epiphany: Baptism of Our Lord—Year A
Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

Well that **Christmas season** passed in the blink of an eye. With **Christmas Day** falling on a Sunday, that set up the **Feast of the Holy Name** for last Sunday, and the **First Sunday after the Epiphany** for today. No Christmas I or Christmas II. And in **Matthew's gospel**, we move straight from the **Holy Family's flight into Egypt** to keep the Holy Child safe from Herod's murderous rage and their **return to Nazareth** a few years later when word came of Herod's death *to* about 28 years later and **John the Baptist,** with his camel's hair and locusts and wild honey, calling people to repentance, baptizing them with water for repentance, and calling out all those who thought their "righteousness" or religious pedigree could save them from moving into such a change of heart and mind. It's a bit of whiplash, eh?

But as **John was laying out what holiness of life really looks like and leading people down into the waters, here came Jesus with great intentionality**. Hear how **Matthew** tells this story again.

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, *hindered him, utterly prohibited him, forbidden this to happen*, **saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"** For **John**, this was *not* how this was supposed to go.

But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Then he consented.

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Let it be so now…Then he consented…The Greek word for *both* of these phrases is the same, and it is a strong sentiment: *let it be, let it go, yield up, leave it behind, leave it behind so that what is left may remain.*

John had to let something go for Jesus' baptism to occur; he **had to let go of his idea about how this was *supposed* to unfold**. How often do we hold fast to an idea, a vision, a perspective that prevents, that hinders something new, something deeper from unfolding?

And even more to the point of today, as we think about **baptism**, ***what do we need to let go of, what do we need to leave behind so that our baptism may unfold in our lives? What will we need to yield up? What will we need to just let be?***

We can start with the realm of **repentance** laid out in the **renunciations we profess in our baptismal liturgy**. There are three spheres where we are called to do this work. We vow ***not* to give our energy to Satan—which is just another way to talk about adversarial energy, especially that diabolical energy that lives to throw us apart, that spirit of division—**we vow ***not* to give our energy to Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God**; we vow ***not* to give our energy to the evil powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God**; and we vow *not* to give **our**

energy to the dynamics within ourselves that block the flow of love and draw us away from the love of God.

This realm of **repentance** also involves our capacity to **leave behind any notion that we can save ourselves**; **leave behind our propensity to trust and rely only in our own strength**; and **our willingness to let go of the notion that we're running the show**.

Peter would extend this further to include **leaving behind any notion that God shows partiality**, and **Isaiah** would remind us that we have to **leave behind any notion of righteousness that *doesn't* include justice and care for those who are imprisoned and living in darkness** in a whole host of ways.

But even deeper than all of that, we have to **let go of any notion that we have to prove ourselves worthy or that we have to earn God's love**.

All this letting go and leaving behind can feel like losing, but the **leaving behind**, the **letting go** *is so that* all that remains is the foundational truth and identity that can blow our hearts wide open: **You are God's beloved; with you, God is well pleased**. *Not with your accomplishments, not with your efforts, not hindered by your failures and shortcomings*— **God is well pleased just with you; God is well pleased simply with your *being*.**

When we **leave behind our notions of worthiness and self-sufficiency**, our **we've-got-it-altogether-and-are-doing-just-fine face** we show to the world, when we **leave behind trusting only in our own strength and capacity**, **then what *remains* is God's grace and love, and *that* grace and love can make us whole**. When we **yield up our way, then what *remains* is the freedom** to ***follow* our Lord, the freedom to *listen* to him with whole heart, and the freedom to *embrace* his way**.

Far from **being bereft of all that we are leaving behind and losing**, **we find the only life worth living, a life that is overflowing with love, that can transform all the dying that this life entails and sow the seeds that bear the fruit of resurrection life**.

It's a paradox, **our true identity, our true self as God's beloveds doesn't depend on us**, *and yet,* for this **true self to unfold in our lives**, to take root and grow in all the ways God's love longs to grow in us and through us, ***it does take our consent,* our willingness to *leave behind* anything that hinders this love and to *let be* the love that makes us whole.**

So, on this First Sunday after the Epiphany, at the beginning of this new year, we are left with a question: ***To lay claim to the beloved child of God that you are, for this true self to shape your baptismal life, what will you need to leave behind?*** Amen.

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