

Claiming Our Identity: *Baptized*

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green

January 12, 2014

Baptism of the Lord

In Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, the main character, Jean Valjean, serves 19 years in prison, where he is known not by his name but rather by the prisoner number tattooed on his chest: 24601. After being released but now penniless, he soon resorts to the desperate act of stealing silver from the home of a kindly priest who offered him a meal. Apprehended for his new crime, Jean Valjean is dragged before the priest to confirm the theft and be executed, but the priest-- inexplicably--covers for him. Valjean gets a reprieve; he experiences God's mercy through the mercy of the kindly priest.

He gratefully rebuilds his life to become wealthy and the proud father of a lovely daughter, but he keeps his true identity a secret. Years later, he is suddenly faced with a terrible choice. Another man, believed by the authorities to be the long sought Jean Valjean, is being led to the gallows. Another man is due to be executed in his place!

"Who am I?" sings Jean Valjean in the theatre adaptation of the tale:

*Can I condemn this man to slavery
Pretend I do not feel his agony
This innocent who bears my face
Who goes to judgement in my place*

*Who am I?
Can I conceal myself for evermore?
Pretend I'm not the man I was before?*

*Must I lie?
How can I ever face my fellow men?
How can I ever face myself again?
My soul belongs to God, I know
I made that bargain long ago
He gave me hope when hope was gone
He gave me strength to journey on*

*Who am I? Who am I?
I am Jean Valjean!*

And at the end of this gut wrenching song he turns himself in:

*Who am I?
24601!*

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Who are we? It is oh-so-important that we know how to answer this question, each of us for her or himself.

Jean Valjean vacillates between thinking of himself as a victim of prior injustice, as a common criminal known only by the numbers tattooed on his chest, or as a man whose soul belongs to God who gave him hope. And because he recognizes himself, finally, to be a man whose soul belongs to God who gave him hope, he makes the decision that he does. Turning himself in he accepts condemnation that an innocent man may go free.

Who are you? What are the different ways that you think of yourself? Are you the victim of a prior injustice? Are you a self-made man (or woman) who worked for every penny you've got? Do you drag around with you the weight of the circumstances of your childhood, or the hurt feelings from the very unfair thing that happened to you 2, 4, 6 or 10 years ago? Do you see yourself primarily as the-person-who-was-wronged?

To what extent does your faith shape your sense of your self? Does your soul belong to God who gave you hope? When push comes to shove, which of your competing identities calls the shots? How brave do you think you could be if you had to be braver than you are now?

Do you understand that it isn't just the big decisions, the *Les Mis* moments, but all of the smaller decisions, too, that, cumulatively, reveal our true colors? Our actual priorities? Our identities?

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For three Sundays during January I will be preaching on the subject of identity. More particularly on the subject of *Christian identity*. In the history of Christianity in this country, it is falling to our generation to take up this topic with some urgency. Mainline Protestant churches like ours have lost the cultural and social prominence enjoyed in the middle of the last century. Our signature style of Presbyterian Christianity--intelligent, thoughtful, unafraid of bringing the life of the mind to the life of faith--doesn't get much air time in media outlets. If we once thought that younger people would find their own way back to church when they started having children, we are discovering otherwise.

Being a Christian takes some explanation these days. Especially if we want to make clear what kind of a Christian we are. And living as a Christian is as hard as it ever was. A good clear answer to the question, "Who Am I?" seems to be especially important at this juncture in religious history in America. When you or somebody else wants to know who you are, here is what I want you to start saying--to yourself or out loud--I want you to start saying, *baptized*.

Who am I? I am baptized.

Now that might not seem like such an earth shattering answer, and on first hearing it may not seem all that helpful or relevant. Those who were baptized as infants, raise your hand if you were baptized as a baby... will have no memory the day. Your baptism was chosen for you and was performed on your behalf entirely without your consent. So why would anyone expect that word to be first out of your mouth when answering such an essential question about *who you are* on this planet?

Well. Here's why. Baptism is the beginning of something. There is a lifetime of meaning to be found in this ancient practice of the church.

Many do not treat baptism as the beginning of anything. Many treat baptism as "fire insurance," something we "do" to the baby in case something bad happens, in case all that stuff that people say about heaven and hell is true. We hedge our bets. We screw up our courage and meet with the pastor. We say the things we think we're supposed to say to the pastor. We buy the little white outfit. We plan a party. In this approach, baptism is not the beginning of something. It is the end, the goal. When the happy day is over, we've got our baby insured against catastrophic loss, and we've got some really cute photos for the baby book.

Studying Jesus' baptism in today's story from the gospel of Matthew, we see a whole lot more than that going on. Jesus's baptism was not the whole story of Jesus but only the prelude to the story. Jesus' baptism was the beginning of something. It was the beginning of something good, hard, and puzzling. Jesus's baptism identified him (and remember we are talking about identity)--Jesus' baptism identified him as a child of God on whom the Spirit rests.

Echoing in the background of this story is our first reading from Isaiah 42, one of the so-called "servant songs". The details of Jesus baptism are drenched in the poetry of this servant song.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth...
(Isaiah 42:1-4a)

Jesus is understood to be this suffering servant, upon whom God's spirit rests. He is understood to be the one so tender as not to break a bruised reed, so gentle as not to quench a dimly burning wick. He is the one who will faithfully bring forth justice. He is the new thing that God has announced and is doing.

Jesus' baptism inaugurated his peculiar ministry that ultimately crowned him with thorns and led to death on a cross. His baptism identified him as one promised and sent from God to accomplish God's purposes.

The baptismal liturgy in the church is intended to do the same for us. The baptismal liturgy forges our identity by announcing who we are in specifically Christian language: we are children of God, loved long before we knew how to love, and accepted by God despite the fact that we will grow up to be unacceptable each in our own special way. Baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit gives us our essential identity, though it may take years or a lifetime for us to claim that identity.

We are not just our gender, or our ethnicity, or our SAT scores, or our job history. Our souls belong to God who gave us hope, first in the water of our baptism, and henceforth in the tender mercies of God that come to us layer upon layer as we grow and live and suffer some and learn how good and beautiful this world is and how much God has entrusted to us as stewards of it.

Claiming our identity in the single word, *baptized*, will help us make the big decisions, when they are called for. Claiming our identity in that single word, *baptized*, will help us tell others why we do what we do and invite them to share the journey. Claiming our identity in that single word, *baptized*, will remind us of the obligations of Christian service, *but more importantly it will remind us of what God has obligated himself to do.*

You see, baptism isn't primarily about *our* promises to God, either as parents on behalf of our children or as adults being baptized or confirmed. No. Baptism is primarily about *God's promises to us!*

God promises in covenant faithfulness to love us without condition, wipe away our sins, and hold all God's beloved sons and daughters with such gentleness that even a bruised reed shall not be broken nor even a dimly burning not be quenched. God promises to go with us where God sends us. God promises light in our darkness. Streams in the desert. Peace that passes understanding. Joy in the morning.

When we live into our baptism, we test these promises and they prove to be trustworthy, in ways that are real for us in the trajectory of our own lives. We have our holy moments, our sudden stopping in our tracks with the heart stopping "Yes!" that cries with joy to be in God's presence and realize it.

We have our small miracles and our daily graces. We learn to know Christ by many names and in many a garb. We learn that to love the lost and lonely is to honor Christ and we learn that baptism was only the beginning and today is only the middle of all that there is to know and do and see and love in God's world for God's sake by God's grace.

What was your baptism the beginning of? And how do things look from where you are now, as you grow in faith and hope and love? Can you live into God's promises for you? Can you make your decisions, small and large, based on that one word, that one truth with its lifetime of meaning, based on the reality of your baptism?

Through baptism we are united with Christ in life, united with him and death, and raised with him in new life. These promises are for us and for our children's children.

This is who we are. Baptized.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Rev. Ruth L. Boling