

Claimed in Baptism – Matthew 3:13-17 – January 12, 2020

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For those of you who have made trips by airplane, you know that traveling the friendly skies entails a certain amount of risk. Now I'm not talking about plane crashes, though that is a remote possibility. I am referring to the risk we take when we say goodbye to our luggage at the check-in counter. As I lift my bags onto the scale and watch the airline personnel affix tags to the handles, I experience a moment of apprehension. Part of me wonders if I'll ever see my luggage again. Losing a bag happens often enough that many of us automatically put an extra change of clothes in our carry on.

Once the flight is over, and it's time to scramble to the baggage claim area, the anxiety starts up again. Even if your bags made it safely through, there's always the chance someone else will grab your bag, mistaking it for their own. After all, so many bags look alike, it would be easy to make that error.

Well I learned a little trick from my grandmother. As I child, I remember that my grandmother always attached a brightly colored ribbon to the handle of her bags. It was something she could recognize and something that set her bag apart from all the other bags that came hurtling down the baggage shoot onto the carousel. When I began to travel by plane, I followed her example of tying bright ribbons to the handles of my luggage. In this way I could recognize my own suitcase among hundreds of others. I know which one is mine, so I can easily find my bag in the carousel, and claim it as my own.

What does it mean to claim something? I went online and checked the Merriam-Webster dictionary. One definition points to a situation in which we assert our right to something – we make a claim - as in the heir to the fortune claimed her inheritance. Likewise, as in my airline baggage example, it means to assert that something belongs to you, that you are the rightful owner. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/claim>

In our gospel lesson from Matthew we see Jesus come down to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. The heavens opened up, God reached out and claimed Jesus as God's own, marking him as a beloved Son. God claimed Jesus – indicating that God had a right to make that claim and that Jesus belonged to God.

In just a few short weeks following Christmas, we find the baby Jesus all grown up. The man John had come out of the wilderness and called to the people of Israel, preaching a baptism of repentance. "Come on down to the Jordan River," he called, "and turn away from your life of sinning. Get yourselves right with God, because someone else is coming who will baptize you with the fire of the Holy Spirit."

When Jesus showed up at the River, John was rather surprised to see him. He knew Jesus wasn't in need of a baptism of repentance, in fact, he had a sneaking suspicion that Jesus was the very person he was preaching about. So John called out to him, "Are you sure you want this? Shouldn't you be the one baptizing me?" But Jesus knew this was the right thing for him to do.

There he stood, on the shore of the Jordan River. He was surrounded by people who had come to repent of their sins, to be cleansed so that they would be ready for the Lord's Messiah. The message of John had spread throughout the countryside, and the people came to him in droves. Many of them longed for change. The world was a hard place in which to live. They longed to witness the arrival of the one proclaimed by John – the one who would usher in God's kingdom. They were earnest in their desire to repent of their sins. They wanted to be ready for this baptism by fire that was to come.

To be sure, there were probably plenty of scoffers in the crowd as well - people who came out just to see what they assumed was some kind of freak show. Then there were others who simply wanted to hop on the next exciting bandwagon. John was the new fad, and they wanted to be a part of the hype. Then there were the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious people, who John criticized as being hypocrites – they were going in the water for the sake of appearances, but not really believing the message. Of course, they thought they had all the answers, and some desert-dwelling, locust eating nut-job wasn't going to teach them anything new.

And it was in the midst of this diverse crowd of humanity that Jesus stood. Surrounded by sinners, of all types. And there he stood, Emmanuel, God-with-us, God clothed in human flesh, willing to submit to the baptism of John – standing in solidarity with the very people he had come to save. The faithful, the scoffers, the doubters, the hypocrites – all humanity, in all its various and sundry forms.

Into the water he went, and when Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, and the voice of God proclaimed, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In that very moment, God marked him and claimed him.

It is not too much of a stretch then to understand that in our own baptisms we too are marked and claimed. It is in our baptism that we become part of the family of God. Many of us were baptized as babies. We don't remember what took place when our parents or guardians handed us over to the pastor to receive the sacrament. We don't remember if we were asleep at the time or awake. Did we laugh with glee or howl in frustration at the feel of water dripping across our foreheads in the name of the triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We don't remember. The significance of the event was lost on us. We certainly can't

recall being identified as a child of the covenant, a child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and brought into the family of Jesus Christ.

Some of us here today were baptized as older children or as adults, and we do remember our baptism. Perhaps we recall professing our faith in Jesus Christ, and we can undoubtedly remember the feel of the water upon us. To us Presbyterians, it doesn't matter when the baptism occurred. What is important about how we understand baptism is, that when it does occur, we are marked by God and we are claimed by God.

Going back to what I mentioned earlier about the definition of the word claim, there is the assumption that God has a right to claim us, that we in fact belong to God. By claiming us in our baptism, God is asserting that right over us. And in that claiming we are called by God into relationship with God.

When Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan, God proclaimed him to be a Beloved Son, with whom God was pleased. Notice how similar those words are to the words we heard in the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah. "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." This servant about whom Isaiah speaks is empowered by God's Spirit to carry out God's work in the world. The Spirit will strengthen the Servant and he will not grow weary or become weak. The servant will do God's work, which Isaiah defines as bringing justice to the nations. And of course, to us who know the rest of the story, this is the very message of Jesus' ministry.

We have already seen how Matthew likes to make reference to Old Testament passages to help define Jesus' role in the world, so it is not surprising to see the connections between the Servant described by Isaiah and the person of Jesus. Yet there is another parallel we can make. Scholars have often asserted that the servant identified in the Isaiah passage can refer to the nation of Israel as a whole. God's people, the nation in its entirety, was commissioned to carry out God's work in the world as this Servant. Later in the passage, that work is defined as being a light to the nations, opening the eyes of those who are blind, and releasing the prisoners from their captivity. By the power of God's spirit, the people of Israel, as the Servant of God, were given the crucial task of doing God's work of justice.

Now here's the leap. If we, in our baptism, are marked as belonging to God and claimed by God, then this task falls to us. We know that we live in a broken world. As much as we'd like to avoid the truth of that statement, we cannot. God wants to heal that brokenness. Obviously, we can't do it by ourselves, so God empowers us with the Holy Spirit. Looking at the passage of Isaiah, we see that the servant can only bring about God's justice through the power of the Spirit. We are only able to fulfill our role as the Servant, because God has equipped us to do so.

I have often referred to Baptism of Jesus as being the inaugural moment of his public ministry. In other words, it was the opening action for everything that was to come after. Jesus not only received the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to carry out his work, but it was at his baptism that his relationship with God was announced. God defined that relationship in two ways. Jesus was his beloved son, and Jesus was one with whom God was pleased.

That's an intimate relationship. It's a relationship full of love and blessing. God loved the Son and was pleased with him. It is the same with us when God claims us in our own baptism. God loves us despite our many flaws. When Jesus stood at the Jordan River among the crowd of people, it for the scoffers and the doubters, the hypocrites and the faithful that he came into the world. He came for all people, because God loves all of us, and desires to claim us all. We belong to God, and through the waters of our baptism, that claim is made known.

Just as the baptism of Jesus signaled the inauguration of his ministry, our baptism signals our inclusion in the family of God. We have been called for a purpose – the purpose of working God's justice in the world – and we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit to equip us to that purpose. For most of us, years have passed since we were baptized. We probably haven't spent much time contemplating what took place at that event – like I said before, many of us don't even remember being baptized. Perhaps we should.

Perhaps we should consider what it means to be claimed by God. Perhaps we should contemplate the implications of belonging to God and being called for a specific purpose. Perhaps we should consider what it means to be equipped by the Holy Spirit to do God's work of justice in the world. And perhaps we should reflect on what it means to be a beloved child of God.

At his baptism, Jesus was claimed by God. His entire life and ministry were marked by that claim. Like a piece of luggage with a brightly colored ribbon tied to its handle, Jesus certainly stood out in a crowd. As baptized members of his family, perhaps we should too.