

***“Well Pleased”***  
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**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**Baptism of the Lord**  
**January 8, 2017**

**Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 42:1-9**

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; <sup>3</sup>a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. <sup>4</sup>He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

<sup>5</sup>Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: <sup>6</sup>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, <sup>7</sup>to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. <sup>8</sup>I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. <sup>9</sup>See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

**New Testament Reading: Matthew 3:13-17**

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”



**Sermon: *“Well Pleased”***

We all carry lots of labels. Some we choose for ourselves and some that are chosen for us. We have nicknames, and reputations. Maybe you’re known as a runner, or the musical one, or the guy who can fix things. As individuals, we are complex, diverse creatures, full of contradictions and paradox. There’s the guy I know who is super interested in war history but is also a complete pacifist. Though each of our labels defines a piece of our identity, no single one captures the fullness of who we are.

But one label we carry is more important in defining who we are; one mark we bear captures a truth more profound and life changing than all the others. It is the one that is put on us when we are baptized.

There are different ways to baptize. Some churches just scoop a little water out of a font and sprinkle it on the head. Some churches go down to the river and dunk the person completely under the water. Some churches have baptismal pools inside their sanctuary and the minister gets right in wearing hip waders as though he were going fishing. But all Christian baptisms use water. And whether dunked or sprinkled; whether the water comes from font, river, or pool, when we baptize a person, we are applying God's mark and acknowledging that person belongs to God.

Our Presbyterian Book of Order says that "Baptism is the sign and symbol of inclusion in God's grace and covenant with the Church."<sup>1</sup> By the waters of baptism we are indelibly marked as God's own and adopted into the family of God. In baptism, we receive the label that matters more than all the others.

In our New Testament passage this morning, we read about Jesus' baptism by John in the River Jordan. Some people ask why Jesus needed to be baptized. For many people, the symbolism of washing is very powerful. In baptism, the water washes our sins away. That's why in some traditions a good dunking is mandatory. But the traditions say Jesus was without sin. And one would presume that he was already filled with the Spirit before it's descent upon him and that he was already incorporated into the family of God before the waters of baptism washed over him. Everything we know about Jesus tells us as John stated in the passage, it was *Jesus* who should be doing the baptizing, not receiving it.

But that's not what happens.

At Christmas, we celebrate Jesus as the coming Messiah; the divine savior of all humankind. It's easy to focus on Christ as "Emmanuel, God with us." But in his baptism, we are forced to reckon with Jesus' humanity.

Tom Long describes Jesus' baptism as "a symbol of his total involvement in the human condition."<sup>2</sup> By submitting to baptism, Jesus shares in the experience of what it means to be fully human. For generations Christians have worked hard to preserve the sinless and holy reputation of Christ, yet he himself, seemed less interested in fostering that reputation. Here as throughout the gospels, Jesus "identified himself with sinners and shared their circumstances as closely as he could."<sup>3</sup> So the question really isn't "Why would Jesus be baptized," but "Why wouldn't he?"

But for Matthew, the "why" of Jesus baptism is not as important as the question of "who?" The first chapters of Matthew are all about answering the basic question: "Who is Jesus?" In the

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<sup>1</sup> "W-2.3004, Inclusion In the Covenant of Grace." *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II: Book of Order*. Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2013. 91. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Long, Thomas G. "The Baptism of Jesus: Matthew 3:13-17." *Matthew*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997. 33. Print. Westminster Bible Companion.

<sup>3</sup> Byars, Ronald P. "The Baptism of Jesus: Matthew 3:13-17." *The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011. 45. Print. Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church.

first two chapters of his gospel account, Matthew has told us that Jesus is messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham,<sup>4</sup> that he was conceived from the Holy Spirit,<sup>5</sup> that he will save his people from their sins,<sup>6</sup> and that he is King of the Jews.<sup>7</sup> But now, we have the final confirmation of the identity of this man who is coming to be baptized: he is the son of God.

In Mark (1:11) and Luke (3:22) when the spirit descends upon Jesus, the words we hear are “You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This suggests a *private* revelation that only Jesus heard. But here, Matthew reports that the words are “*This* is my son...” which suggests it was a *public* announcement to all those gathered at the Jordan. It is to them, too, that Jesus is identified as God’s own son.

So in this baptism scene, we see two things happen: Jesus embraces his humanity, and God labels him and claims him as God’s own son. No matter what anyone else thinks about him, no matter how others may experience him, going forward, this label that God places on Jesus at his baptism will be the only one that matters.

And interestingly enough, that’s the same thing that happens when we are baptized, too. Oh, not the descending dove and divine pronouncement part, but the part where we are claimed by God and are labeled as God’s own.

The Brief Statement of Faith begins with the words “In life and in death we belong to God.”<sup>8</sup> We live in a world that values personal freedom to do what we feel; to seek after our own joy; to march to the beat of our own drummers. The very essence of freedom is that we are unfettered, unbound, and beholden to no one. So the notion of being someone’s property does not necessarily sit well.

But there is another connotation of “belonging.” And that’s to be a part of something. Like how you belong to a club or an organization. In saying that we belong to God we are affirming that we are a part of who and what God is; we are connected intimately to God. This notion is at the very bedrock of our faith

There is nothing magical that happens when we are baptized. It’s symbolic of many things, actually. The water symbolizes the cleansing power of God’s grace. In the waters of baptism, the stain of our sin is washed away and we are made clean. (While we still experience the worldly consequences of our sin, we know that God still loves us and the eternal consequences of our sin are set aside.) In the waters of baptism, we descend and die to our old selves, then rise again to new life with Christ. The waters of baptism remind us of Israel’s story, of passing through the parted waters of the Red Sea and being transformed from slaves to a nation of the

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 1:1, NRSV

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1:20, NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 1:21, NRSV

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 2:2, NRSV

<sup>8</sup> "A Brief Statement of Faith (PCUSA)." *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: The Book of Confessions*. Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly (PCUSA), 2007. 267-68. Print.

people of God. In the waters of baptism, as one author put it, “[we] enter... as one thing and emerge as something entirely different.”<sup>9</sup>

Baptism is a visible sign of an invisible grace. It is a symbolic act which reminds us that God has already made a claim on us and marked us as God’s own long before we were able to make our own claim on God. That is why we baptize infants in our tradition. Many Christians believe that one must be of an age where they can make an informed, public profession of faith before they can be baptized. In those traditions, baptism is largely a confirmation of what the believer does. Some Christians believe that if we are not baptized, then we are living in sin and are therefore outside the bounds of God’s grace.

But the reformed tradition of which we Presbyterians are a part, has always held that God’s grace is active long before our awareness of it and that God acts to claim us long before we can ever lay claim to God. Therefore, baptism is an act that outwardly symbolizes that which we proclaim God has already done within us. And in that inward act, we receive a new label; a new identity that changes us, and outshines all the other labels and marks we bear: that we are children of God; which is a profound truth in a world that puts a lot of faith in labels.

When we meet other people, we are often quick to assess; to put them into a category that is easier to understand. In some cases, that may be helpful. When you’re looking for someone to fix your plumbing, you’d be wise to look for a plumber, first.

But when you want to *really* know someone, labels aren’t as helpful. People are complex, complicated things and each is a unique mixture of beliefs and experiences. You can spend years with another person and not really know them. So we slap labels on each other: conservative/liberal, Republican/Democrat, Buckeye/Wolverine.

But all too often we stop at the labels and never really get to know the person. I remember in 2009 when Susan Boyle appeared on the television show Britain’s Got Talent. She was a frumpy, 47-year-old Scottish woman with a heavy accent who claimed to want to be a professional singer. Based on outward appearances, the audience laughed at her. The hosts of the show, including Simon Cowell, best known for his harsh criticisms of contestants on American Idol, rolled his eyes and was openly skeptical. They all labeled her when they first saw her and based on those labels, no one gave her a chance.

And then she started singing.

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<sup>9</sup> Garrett, Greg. "Matthew 3:13-17: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor. Vol. 1, Year A. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 237-41. Print.

In the video of that moment (which you can still find on YouTube<sup>10</sup>), we get to see Cowell's eyebrows rise as jaws all over the audience drop. Judge Amanda Holden smiles broadly and the third judge, Piers Morgan, appears to get choked up. Before Boyle can get through the first verse of her song the audience who seemed so ready to dismiss her just moments before, erupted into a standing ovation.

And today, Susan Boyle is a world-renowned recording artist. She has sold over 19 million albums, she's topped the charts in 30 different countries and she's received two Grammy Award nominations.<sup>11</sup>

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul writes "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."<sup>12</sup>

That truth should affect the way we see ourselves and others.

Labels *can* be helpful, but when we let the world's categories and values determine who is worthy of our time and consideration, they also make us lazy. Baptism reminds us that we belong to God and that regardless of what superficial labels the world places on us, we are each one special to God and with us, God is well pleased.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> *Susan Boyle's First Audition in Britain's Got Talent*. Perf. Susan Boyle, Simon Cowell, Amanda Holden, Piers Morgan. *YouTube*. YouTube, 13 June 2012. Web. 11 Jan. 2014. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSDoPY9B0wQ>>.

<sup>11</sup> "Susan Boyle." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 09 Jan. 2017. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan\\_Boyle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan_Boyle)>.

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<sup>12</sup> Galatians 3:26-28, NRSV