

Israel's Only Savior

43 But now, this is what the LORD says—
he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
² When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
³ For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush^[a] and Seba in your stead.
⁴ Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
and because I love you,
I will give people in exchange for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
⁵ Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
I will bring your children from the east
and gather you from the west.
⁶ I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’
and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’
Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the ends of the earth—
⁷ everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”

Luke 3

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with^[b] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose

sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with^[c] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

The Baptism and Genealogy of Jesus

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Today is Epiphany Sunday, and we in Western Christianity celebrate two important events in our faith. The first, is the adoration of the Magi, and the second is the baptism of our Lord. We saw the children place the Magi a few moments ago to celebrate Epiphany. We’re all probably used to seeing nativities with three wise men kneeling before the baby Jesus, one giving gold, one giving frankincense and one giving myrrh. This tradition is reflected in my favorite Christmas hymn, We Three Kings. The hymn goes on to ascribe symbolism to each of the gifts, representing Jesus’ kingship, divinity, and priestly sacrifice. Most of what we think we know about the magi, however, comes from church tradition and not Scripture. Now, I do believe that Church Tradition holds a great deal of value, and perhaps much of it is correct as it comes to us by our faith ancestors who were much closer in time to the actual events, and when we consider church tradition, we are allowing our faith ancestors to have a say in our lives today. That said, Sola Scriptura, which means Scripture is our only rule for faith and practice, and

Scripture tells us very little about the Magi. The number is not given, nor are their names, or even their country of origin. It's generally believed they came from Persia because of the tradition of wise people there, but it is not known for sure. The Orient is assumed based upon their gifts.

They did not arrive promptly as Jesus was born, though how long after his birth is unknown. We do know that they saw the star and then had to travel to find Jesus, without cars or airplanes, through dangerous country, so many scholars suggest it could have even been a year later. They did bring gifts, of gold, Frankincense and Myrrh, gifts appropriate for a divine king. Despite the humble setting they found Jesus in, a poor son of a craftsman, they honored him with both their journey, their visit and their gifts and we remember that today.

The other event celebrated today is the baptism of Jesus. Baptism was not unfamiliar to the Jews who came to hear John preach. Gentile converts to Judaism underwent baptism, and ritual washings were very much a part of Jewish life and worship. Jews would undergo ritual washings as a remedy when they were unclean, and the tradition continues today in orthodox communities. One example has been a topic of recent discussion in popular culture due to the book *Orthodox* by Deborah Feldman and the Netflix series it inspired. Both discuss the use of a Mikvah bath, which some orthodox Jewish women use at times in their life when

they are considered unclean. These ritual washings symbolized cleansing one of their impurities, and thus were a common and important part of Jewish life.

John's baptism seems to be a bit different. It symbolizes repentance and cleansing for the coming Messiah, a washing away of sin, and a new kind of conversion in to the family of Christ. It's easy to see why many in the crowd may have felt that they needed to be cleansed of their sins. John preached to all manner of sinful humans. Liars, cheats, tax collectors, pharisees, and so on. There was no one in the crowd that was sinless, that hadn't made a mess of things, much as there are none there today that can say they are without sin. All present needed to repent and be baptized by John.

Until, that is, Jesus approaches. Jesus was the only human to ever exist on this planet entirely free from sin. He had no need to repent. He had no need to be baptized, in the sense of washing or cleansing anyway. Yet the creator of the universe, perfect in love and grace, free from any sin or corruption, stood before his own creations and submitted to be baptized.

Why? Theologians have asked this question and beat it from every angle. The most common understandings are that Jesus was setting an example, and instituting the sacrament, marking the beginning of his public ministry, and as a way to demonstrate Jesus' obedience to God's will and that seems very wise and true and good, but it still doesn't really answer the deeper "why?" Why would God

go to such humbling lengths? Why would God become a man and submit to one of his creations in a ritual generally reserved for sinners, that God clearly did not need to do being God.

The think the answer is here in Isaiah. “Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you...Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

These events in the life of Jesus are familiar to us, and sometimes I think we forget just how remarkable they are. God, who created all the universe, more space and time and matter than you and I could even comprehend, finds you precious to God, loved and honored, to the point that Jesus would willingly give all up, be born in the most humble of manners, live a life that was, at least materially, quite humble, and even submit to be baptized by John. Even John is stunned by this, and tells Jesus that Jesus should be baptizing John. All this because of God’s great love for you. There is no where you can go that God is not willing to follow. God says I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth. There is no where you can go that

is out of reach of God, no sin so great that God is unwilling to humble God's self out of love for you, God's sons and daughters.

Most Christians talk of God's love in one way or another. If asked, most of us would respond that, of course, God loves us. But do we really let that penetrate our hearts? Do we really believe it in a real and tangible way, a way that saturates our lives? When someone loves us, usually that affects our lives in some way. The love of my children propels me to try and be the best parent I can for them. The love of my husband and biggest fan gives me confidence and a sense of safety. I'm sure you could think of some examples as well. But is God's love for you real enough to you, that it affects your life? I often find that people say automatically that God loves them, but they don't really feel it, and thus it has little effect on their lives. How does one live as though God loves them when they don't really believe it?

So, I would like to try something a little different today. This might be out of our comfort zone, but I promise to do it decently and in good order like a true presbyterian, and in that spirit would ask that all rotten tomatoes be held until after service. I would invite you to imagine God in your mind, whatever that looks like for you. Perhaps you've seen a picture of Jesus that comes to mind, perhaps it's Aslan the lion from CS Lewis's work, or maybe it's simply a feeling you have of God's presence. Close your eyes if you like. And I want you to imagine God

speaking these words, because they are God-breathed and they are for you, yes, you, and I'm going to give you just a few moments to really imagine God speaking these words to you. Hear God's word: "you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you."

Do you hear God's great love for you? So great is God's love for you, yes you, that God would humble God's self beyond all imagination for you. Anyone who has ever told you different, regardless of who they were, was wrong. God would leave heaven because you are precious in God's eyes. God would be born in a stable to a poor Jewish couple because you are honored in God's eyes. God would humble God's self and be baptized by John, Because God loves you. For you, God would humble God's self almost beyond recognition. Most of the people that God humbled God's self for would not be able to see past the poor trappings God chose to see the glory of God incarnate, though some, like the Magi whose adoration of Christ we remember today, would recognize the king and God before them. The Magi knew by the rising of the star that a great king had been born. It is likely they expected to find a small prince. After all, they do inquire of King Herod about the newborn king. Instead, they find this poor babe, born to poor parents. A kind of humility never seen in their experience of royalty. No son of Herod would have been found so, no one of royal blood from Persia or Babylon would be found in such a state, and yet the Magi recognize the great king before them, how he has

humbled himself, and adore him to the point of risking death by refusing to give up Jesus' location to Herod, who wished to kill him. God so loved them, that God would humble God's self so out of love for us, for those magi. And those Magi, in turn, lived a life effected by that love, risking Herod's wrath to protect the newborn Messiah.

Sadly, many of us have had seeds of doubt planted in us, doubts that God loves us in any real way. Sometimes because of our decisions, or our sins, or our beliefs, or our circumstances. I've faced plenty of that myself. During the ordination process in our denomination, there comes a point where you are questioned on the floor of presbytery, and it's always stressful. In Savannah Presbytery there was a member who would always ask candidates if they loved Jesus. When he passed away, someone else would always ask in his honor. When it came my time for my questioning, as part of it, I had to give my testimony. It had been a rough couple of years for me. If you could've seen my soul I'm pretty sure it looked like a half drowned cat. It was, without a doubt, the worst and darkest time in my life, and not just because I was learning Aramaic. So, after hearing my tale of woe, the final question was, of course, did I love Jesus. I was relieved because that meant the grilling was over, and I answered, of course. The elder didn't sit down though. He asked me, if after everything I'd been through, if I still believed Jesus loved me. I answered yes, but I've never forgotten that question. I

still ask myself that from time to time, just to remind myself that all the doubts are wrong and that God loves me, I am precious to God, and honored.

As we continue our ministry out into the world today, I would invite you to return as often as you need to the image of God telling you that God loves you, you are honored and precious to God. I would also invite you to consider how your day might be different if you were to live into the reality that God loves you so profoundly. A love like that can transform us, and simply cannot be contained, it spills out from us and splashes onto to everything we touch, as well it should, for every time we live like God loves us, we show God's great love to others as something real and beautiful and profound. May we always remember we are sons and daughters gathered from however far we've strayed, called by the God who would go to such incredible humbling lengths to show us, quite literally in the flesh, that we are precious and loved, and may our lives reflect this truth.