



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 1

To Be the Beloved

[RCL] Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I want to talk a bit about the Baptism of Jesus, about what it means. And the place to start, of course, is with today's Gospel reading. We heard the first part of this story just a few weeks ago at the end of Advent. Remember how John was at the Jordan River, the place where the people of Israel crossed over into the Promised Land, and how he preached repentance and judgment—he promised that the axe was lying at the root of the tree, and that any useless chaff would be burned with unquenchable fire? And remember how John told people what to do if they wanted to live out their repentance?

It was to this place, and into this context, that Jesus came to be baptized. Now, we Christians need to remember that our basic understanding of baptism, and of our own baptism, comes from Jesus, and from what happened at his baptism, and from what happened after and because of his baptism—and not from anyone else John baptized, and not from anywhere else.

The first thing I want to point out is that, when Jesus was baptized, no one told him what to do. John the Baptist didn't tell him what to do—and remember, John was truly delighted to tell absolutely everybody else, including King Herod, exactly what to do. But not Jesus. And God the Father didn't tell Jesus what to do, either. Notice that carefully. The Father told Jesus *who Jesus was*; the Father announced his identity: "You are my son, the Beloved..." But there is nothing in there about what Jesus was supposed to *do*; nothing about what it *looked like* for him to be the beloved, the uniquely named Son of the Father.

Jesus had to work that one out for himself. So, today I want to look at some of the options and expectations that were in front of Jesus as he decided what it would mean for him to be the chosen one, to be the Messiah. Remember, Jesus was a real person who had to make real decisions, just like we do—he wasn't a puppet. And Jesus didn't decide what to do in a vacuum. He lived in his particular world, at his particular time. And this means he was surrounded by a variety of expectations of what it meant to be the Messiah.

What's more, many of these different expectations are still with us, and folks are still pretending that Jesus chose one or another of these other options, and not the one he in fact chose. (More on that later.)

When Jesus was named the Beloved of the Father, here are some of the places he could have looked to determine what this might mean, what this identity might look like. First of all, he could have looked *up*,

through the waters of the Jordan, seen John the Baptist, and just stopped there.

Jesus could have lived a rigid, ascetic life, ignoring or disdainful of physical and social pleasures. He could have preached a rigorous moralism, worn weird clothes, eaten odd food, and promised that if you were not good, God was going to get you. Jesus, like John the Baptist, could have confined his message to the people of Israel, and waited for the wrath to come. A lot of people thought the Messiah would be like that—in fact, a lot of people thought John *was* the Messiah precisely because he did these things. Jesus could have looked there for a model.

Or, he could have looked at the headlines, at the issues of the time, and become an anti-Roman agitator—allied perhaps with the Zealots, who invented guerrilla warfare, or with one of the other nationalist parties. He could have organized an army and set out to defeat the Roman occupiers and restore God's people to their rightful heritage by force of arms. There were several rebel leaders who claimed to be the Messiah—or who were considered to be the Messiah—and who did exactly that—with more or less success. Jesus could have promised military victory, economic prosperity, and independence from Rome. This was probably the most common expectation at the time—just about everybody (including the disciples) *knew* this was what the Messiah was going to do—and this was *clearly possible*. The people were ready for this, and, within just a few years, Palestine was in full military revolt against Rome. Jesus could have gone down that road.

Or, he could have looked to his Holy Scriptures, to what we call the Old Testament, and chosen one of its many and varied images of what it looks like to be the Beloved of the Father.

He could have gone to the Book of Kings, and taken David or Solomon, the great kings of ancient Israel, as his model. They were stellar soldiers and politicians, players on the international scene, and they had remained symbols and constant reminders of Israel's past greatness as an independent nation and a world power. People wanted those good old days back, and lots of them expected the Messiah to bring them back.

Or Jesus could have looked to the book of Daniel, and its violent, dramatic vision of God's triumph, when God suddenly and unmistakably appears in history and brings one horrible trial after another on to all creation—until all evil is decisively destroyed, and the chosen are given a renewed and perfect world. This was also a popular hope among a number of relatively small but nonetheless influential religious groups that Jesus knew about and that knew about Jesus.

Or, he could have turned to prophets like Haggai. These prophets saw the Messiah as the one who would make Israel ritually pure, drive out all foreign influences, cleanse and perfect the Temple and its sacrifices, bring about right worship and study, and create a racially and religiously pure community.

Those were just a few of the choices—there were lots more. All of these were popular visions of the Messiah in Jesus' day, and there were self-styled Messiahs who modeled themselves on each of them. Each was an option for Jesus.

In fact, these options are still with us. There are not a few who want, and who even pretend, that Jesus and his

Church are really *all and only* about any one of these: preaching morality, or bringing social reform, or getting personal prosperity, or restoring national greatness, or recreating the good old days, or creating the perfect, pure, and isolated community, as homogeneous as it is holy, or just hanging around until God brings down the whole shebang in one great explosion. All of these understandings of what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah were live options for Jesus, just as they are for us. They are all temptations – temptations that Jesus rejected.

In fact, the story of the temptations in the wilderness shows Jesus rejecting, one after another, several of these options, several of these ways of being the Messiah that he had to choose from.

Still, after he rejected all of these popular expectations, Jesus *did* go to the Bible for his understanding of what it meant, of what it would look like, for him to be the Beloved of the Father. He went to a generally ignored and fairly overlooked part of the Bible. He went to a part that wasn't even about the Messiah.

He went to the servant songs of the prophet Isaiah—four powerful and perplexing poems. (The part of Isaiah we just heard is right in the middle of them.) In these passages, God's chosen one is portrayed as a servant—weak, gentle, patient, and burdened with pain. He is a servant who somehow, mysteriously and through his obedient suffering, redeems not only Israel but all of humanity. In these passages, the servant of God, the Beloved, fulfills none of the popular expectations of a Messiah. (And Jesus was generally rejected as Messiah by his own people because of this). Instead, Jesus embraced a faithful obedience that leads only through great affliction to his justification, and to the victory of God. It was these poems of Isaiah, and the vision behind them, and none of the others, that Jesus chose as his own. This, he decided, is what it would look like for him to live out his ministry and his mission. And the Father was well pleased.

When Jesus came out of the waters of baptism, he was given his identity—he was named beloved of God. He had to decide where to look to discover how he was to live out that identity. There were lots of options; there still are.

Today is one of the four Sundays each year when the Church calls us to pay special attention to our own baptism. We are called to remember that we, too, have been named the beloved of God and that we, too, must live this out, day to day, in our own place and in our own time. Jesus chose the image of the suffering servant, the one who gives up everything for the sake of faithful obedience to God's word. We choose Jesus. That is our glory – and our challenge.

(This is one of the Sundays on which the Prayer Book suggests we renew our baptismal vows, which are found on page 292 of the Book of Common Prayer.)

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