

“What God has Already Done”
A sermon by Rev Sue Strachan based on Matthew 3:13-17
Wolcott Congregational Church
January 8, 2017

When I meet with families to talk about baptism I often tell them that what we are going to do is to acknowledge and accept what God has already done by the miracle of birth; that is given this child life in a family of faith – at home and through the church. God chooses to give us the responsibility and we must take it seriously; for even Jesus, God’s own son, was baptized. As we just heard, when Jesus came to his cousin, John the Baptizer, John stopped him saying, “I should be baptized by you!” Jesus’ reply was that his baptism would be done to fulfill all righteousness. Righteousness simply means to be right with God, to do as God wills instead of following our own desires. Do you think Jesus was not already ‘right’ with God? Or, could it be that the righteousness that was going to be fulfilled was going to be done by us? That Jesus came to show us, teach us, call us to continue his work in the world; healing, feeding, welcoming, loving, and by the grace of God through faith, making the world right?

It occurred to me after last week’s message about the gift of grace that we need to add something to the very old expression, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” We usually say this when something bad, or difficult, or heartbreaking has happened; or we see someone in dire straits and are so grateful (at least momentarily) that it has not happened to us, to me. We recognize it could happen to any one of us, whatever it might be; we’re glad it has not. But, do we ever get to the place where we then recognize also that there goes a beloved child of God; a person desperately in need of grace and that somehow maybe we are the ones who are supposed to be agents of that grace; working to heal, feed, teach, lead, and love all of God’s children? Making things ‘right?’

The gospels tell us that when Jesus rose up out of the waters of his baptism the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove. I cannot imagine that this was the first instance of the presence of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ life. So, it seems to me that the visible presence of the Spirit showed up for us, so we would know who Jesus was and is; so we would know to expect the presence of the Spirit at our own baptism. And, haven’t you felt it with each baptism here? With each precious child comes the sure knowledge that all is right with the world. That sense of rightness is a glimpse of God’s world or God’s kingdom on earth. With each baptism God is making things right – the visible sign of the invisible grace. If we could only bottle it (like those mini bottles of energy drinks) and take a sip each morning and throughout the day.

In baptism the fullness of God is seen, known, heard, felt; in baptism all three persons of the Trinity are recognized and present – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God’s voice is heard saying, “This is my beloved Son; in whom I am well-pleased.” Did Jesus need to be told who he was? Yes and no. No, because Jesus knew very well to whom he belonged. We can hear it when at age twelve he says to Mary and Joseph who had been frantically looking for him, “You should have known I would be in my Father’s house.” And, yes did need to be told, because it is at this point in time Jesus must turn his attention and energies and his very life toward serving God’s

will publicly. It is an affirmation which will hold Jesus in good stead and one that is tested immediately after the baptism during the temptations out in the wilderness. For there in the wilderness, the Tempter comes and says, "If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down. . . If you are the Son of God, then . . ." In Jesus' baptism there are no ifs, ands, or buts – "This is my Beloved Son." In those five words there is all the strength needed to get through all the temptations life will bring. Those five words become our affirmation with each baptism we witness, for we are all formed in the image of God who breathed life's spirit into each of us beloved children.

It is a good thing to be reminded of who we are; reminded that we are not independent agents in the world, not if we have been baptized. For in each baptism we acknowledge the fact that God is the giver of life, that each child is a miracle placed into our arms and homes, into our church family to nurture, teach, strengthen, and love to the end that he or she will know to whom she belongs, he belongs. It is in that knowledge that we can overcome anything that would hurt us or destroy us. "I am a beloved child of God." The story is told of Martin Luther, the German Reformer who set the Protestant Reformation into motion, who came under persecution and found his life threatened at different times. History says that in those dire circumstances he did not cry out, "Save me, Lord." But rather gained strength to face what was coming with the loud acclamation, "I am baptized."

Baptism is nothing less than the promise that we are God's beloved children. No matter where we go, God is with us. No matter what we do, God is for us and will never leave us. It is our way to confirm our receipt of God's promises, of confirming what God has already done. But, that is not the end of it, it is rather the beginning of our lives. Just as it was the beginning of Jesus' public ministry it is now ours to live out, calling on that same strength and power, on the sure knowledge of who we are in the eyes of God. So here we are, beloved children of a powerful and loving God. What does that do for us and what are we called to do because of it? I believe our calling is to fulfill all righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Our calling is to do nothing less than to make the world right.

I have told you before and I will assure you again. Remember your baptism and your whole world view and the way you interact with the world will change for the better. For nothing can separate you or me from the great love of God found in Jesus Christ. Wake up every morning and go to bed every night and anytime throughout the day reminding yourself, "I am a beloved child of God; in whom God is well-pleased. I am baptized." Martin Luther suggested that each time you wash your face or hands remember the waters of your baptism, who you are and to whom you belong. Each time you face a decision, a temptation, a seemingly overwhelming desire, a powerful stressor to do or be or have something, remember first who you are and make a decision in keeping with the will of the God who loves you, the One who can save you even from yourself, and the Spirit which is always with you. In knowing you are a beloved child of God you have the power to say, "Yes" when you should say yes and "No" when you should say no. Amen.