

Baptism of our Lord A 2017

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

How did the leopard get his spots?
How did the elephant get his trunk?
How did an armadillo come to be?

If you remember the Just So Stories,
Maybe it's the fantastical explanations,
The origin myths of the animal kingdom,
That are coming back to mind.

Or maybe, like me,
You remember first
How the storyteller begins:
In the high and far off times,
Oh best beloved . . .

In the high and far off times,
Oh best beloved,
There lived a man called Jesus.
One day he went down to the River Jordan
And asked for baptism.
The waters closed over his head,
And when he came back up for air,
A dove descended,
And a voice called him beloved.

This story, too,
Is an origin myth.
Maybe it happened just this way,
Maybe something else happened
Some other way.
But I know this story is true.

I know this story is true
Because I see its power
stretching through the gospel narratives
and into the stories of the first Christians
and the lives of the women and children and men
who lived the faith in good times
and times of challenge

and times of deep darkness.

How else could they have marched for justice
And sheltered refugees
And shaken the structures of oppression?
How else could they have spread the good news
Across continents in a generation?

How else could Jesus have lived into his mission:
To show us the face and hands and voice of God?
To show us what we can look like
When we see the face of God,
Touch the hands of God,
Hear the voice of God?
Jesus shows us who we could be.

When Jesus hears the words,
This is my beloved,
With whom I am well pleased,
He understands and acts on them.
He lets that certain sureness
That he is loved,
Completely loved and accepted,
Transform him.
The man who walked down to the river Jordan
Was a good man,
A righteous man
A learned rabbi
And a prophet.
The man who came up out of the water
Drenched by the gift of life itself
And set on fire by God's spirit
Becomes the one who shows us God.

His baptism is the moment
When he becomes what he receives,
The message that he is loved by love itself.
He becomes the good news of love
And welcome and forgiveness and reconciliation.
He becomes the good news of compassion and justice and peace.
And as he is,
So could we become.

But it's hard to believe it.
We know so much better what happens
When we can't hear the words,

You are my beloved,
I am well pleased with you.

All our grasping, striving for more,
Our belittling and demeaning of others,
All our anxiety,
Our desperate, fruitless attempts
To fight off uncertainty,
All have their roots in our failure to believe
That we are loved,
Completely and forever,
No matter what.

Imagine a world where more of us believed it.
We are entering a time of utter uncertainty.
Could we believe
That one thing is certain?
God's love is certain and sure,
And will not fail us.
What if those we have brought to power
Could hear and believe those words?

We hear messages over and over
That there can only be winners and losers.
That there is only enough for the winners.
Could we believe
That there is enough love and acceptance
For everyone?

We are told to be afraid.
That the world is full of threats.
Could we believe
That the one who loves us all,
Just as we are,
Can gather us all into one body,
So that none of us need be afraid?

If we could believe
That the message from heaven is for us,
That we are loved,
Then we would be free.
Free from fear,
Free for love.

Jesus is set free
By this sure and certain truth.

He takes it into his soul,
And it goes right through him,
And makes him who he is.
The one who can accept all the love
That the source of love can give,
Become love,
And share love.
This is the promise of baptism.
That we can become
Who we are called to be –
With God's help.

Jesus is called to be God with us.
We are called to be a people
Formed by love,
Set free by acceptance and reconciliation,
Inspired by the vision of God's promises made real.

We are called to be a people
Transformed by baptism,
Continually renewed by sacrament
And sustained by prayer,
By scripture.
A people encouraged for the work of justice.

This is what we promise,
Again and again,
At the waters of baptism.

Every time we renew our promises,
We have another chance
To be amazed
At the honor and dignity and splendor
Of what we are called to be and do.

We will do this again,
In just a few moments.

After we recite the historic formulation
Of the church's faith,
We promise to live out that faith
In the real world.

With God's help,
We engage in ongoing formation,
We commit to living in community,

We are faithful in sacramental worship,
And we pray.

With God's help,
We recognize, address and resist
The brokenness of the world
And our structures of power.
We examine our own conduct
And when it falls short, when we mess up,
We turn around and start again.
We seek reconciliation.

We commend the faith that is in us,
In our speaking and our actions.
We let ourselves be known as Christians.

We affirm that Christ is found
In all persons,
And that we honor, love, and serve him
When we honor, love and serve them.
We recognize that every human being
Is made in the image and likeness
Of the living God.

Yes, every human being.
There is no other foundation
For the search for justice and peace than this.

We are entering a time
When nothing is certain.
These promises will be hard to keep.
They always are.
They will be hard in new ways now,
And we will fumble and fall
As we move into the unknown.
But the promises will not fail.
Embedded in them
Is the knowledge
That we will fall short,
And have to try again,
And again, and again.

One thing sustains us.
We do these things
With God's help.

It seems to me that we often think
The help God offers
Is like cheerleading.
And perhaps you experience it that way.
Does God come alongside you
And say,
Come on,
You can do it?
Put your feet to the floor,
Pull up your bootstraps.
Does God talk like that?
Maybe so.

But sometimes, perhaps,
God's help is more elusive
And at the same time,
More profound.
What God said,
We know,
To the one who had the hardest task,
Was this:
You are my beloved,
Oh best beloved,
And with you I am well pleased.

How did Jesus get his courage?
His compassion?
He listened to the story,
Oh best beloved.

He listened to the story
Of God's faithfulness,
Of God's hidden, active presence
In good times and in dark times.
Most of all,
He listened to the good news
Brought to him
At his baptism.

In the high and far off times,
Oh best beloved,
He heard these words,
And he believed them:
You are my beloved,
With you I am well pleased.

And then he told the story to you,
Oh best beloved.