

## Can You Identify?

Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday, and it may surprise you that I'm not going to spend a great deal of time talking about Baptism, and not even much time in the New Testament. Instead, let's consider this event from the standpoint of its primary participants.

Like us, they had family history. We are descended from parents, grandparents, great-grandparents... and they each had stories... stories about when they came here, how they met, who they knew along the way, and what they did. Those stories *form* our history. They make us who we are.

I am reminded of my mother-in-law, who worked long days as a homemaker and stay-at-home mom back in the era before convenience appliances—but who made time each day to sit down and spend some time with old friends—which is to say, she took a load off her tired feet for half an hour each day to watch “*The Guiding Light*.” She would say, “I like to watch my story...” just a bit apologetically, as if she needed to justify to us the time she spent, even though she was staying busy doing what we would call multi-tasking—folding laundry and mending clothes.

But hear that again... My... Story... She made time for her story because she cared about those people ... she identified.

Like Mom, I enjoy stories that keep you coming back... the programs I'm drawn to are descendants of those daytime soap operas. I've noticed a similarity over the years—my favorite programs have a tendency to open with a voice-over announcement starting with the words “Previously on ...” “Previously on *Sports Night*...” “Previously on *House*...” “Previously on *NCIS*...” ... followed by just enough material to let you engage with tonight's program even if you haven't been watching for the past three years.

Today we have a very important story—and I invite you now to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart, and see if you can begin to hear how this is not just any story...it's really also *your* story...

The Gospel of Luke makes it clear to us that the man who came to his kinsman in the Jordan that day was a man with a clear sense of his identity. Jesus ben Joseph, of the house and lineage of David, knew who he was. (And just in case WE don't know who he was, Luke makes sure to tell us in the next set of verses.)

He knew that he stood that day at the intersection of time and eternity—with nearly 2000 years of recorded family history behind him—and God's plan for the salvation of humankind before him.

So it's not too big a stretch to imagine that this particular son of the promise might approach the start of his ministry with some trepidation... and that drawing on his knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures he might cling to that family identity... remembering the words of God through the prophet:

*“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name,  
you are mine.  
This water of baptism won't overwhelm you—  
and neither will anything else.  
You are precious to me—  
I love you.  
Do not fear.”*

Jesus would have taken comfort in this ability to connect with his heritage and with God's promise—he could identify.

This identity dates back some 1,800 years to a time when his ancestor Abram lived in the city of Ur, in the Babylonian region of the Ancient Middle East—the area we'd call Iraq today. The people worshipped many gods—in fact Jewish tradition says that Abram's father Terach was an idol merchant. But Abram came to believe there was only one God—that the universe was the work of a single Creator—and when this Creator God called to him, he followed.

So with his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, Abram got up and left his country and kindred and traveled to Canaan. There God made an incredible promise—a covenant—that they would not die childless, but even in their old age would become the parents of descendants too numerous to count, and would inhabit the land to which God had led them.

Children and land—big promises to an old, childless couple wandering in the desert. It changed them... they were no longer wanderers... no longer part of the tribe they left behind in Ur... living in faith, trusting God's promise, they accepted a new identity as "God's chosen." With this covenant sealed by the sign of circumcision they took on new names—Abraham and Sarah—and they welcomed a miracle son: Isaac.

There's more. This identity includes stories of great faith—faith so strong that even in the face of the most horrible trial imaginable—"kill your son, your only son"—Abraham trusted God. And because of that act of willing surrender God promised that Abraham and his descendants would grow into a great nation—a nation through which all the nations of the world would be blessed.

This identity includes the story of Moses and the gift of the law, of time spent wandering in the wilderness, of the consolidation of all the tribes of Abraham's descendants—the building of a great nation by David and a great temple by his son Solomon—and then the slippery slope of increasingly craven leaders who ultimately embraced only power, turning from God and worshipping idols until only a *HUGE* lesson could wake them up—a lesson foretold by prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah: the utter despair of war and conquest—the people taken into exile in Babylon... the temple desecrated and destroyed... their very identity wiped away. For five decades they longed for God to rescue them—but had no respite.

Then... finally... a voice of consolation: "Comfort, O comfort my people ...speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid." Our passage today is from that same portion of Isaiah—the so-called "Book of Consolations."

The whole story is too long to tell here... but there's a common thread—and it's about God's faithfulness and our waywardness—about how time and time again the people lost sight of God's plan and succumbed to an inferior human plan: trading greed for grace... pride for penitence... empty lust for true love... anger for adoration... fearfulness for fortitude.

And every time the people messed up, God called them back (sometimes gently, and sometimes not so gently) into relationship—a relationship with one constant: God's promise, unbroken.

Friends, it's *all about* identity... a thousand pages—eighteen hundred years—of identity. And on this particular day, embracing that family identity, Jesus came forward prepared to accept a new one. He was about to begin a ministry as God's anointed—the Messiah. But more than that, Jesus was about to accept *our* identity.

Have you ever wondered—I'll be surprised if you haven't—just exactly *why* Jesus came to be baptized? Baptism wasn't a new idea—in fact, ritualized cleansing by immersion in water was then, and is still, a rite of passage for those seeking to convert to Judaism. But Jesus was already Jewish—and the Gospels tell us that John came offering a different kind of baptism: a baptism of *repentance*. If Jesus was without sin, as we believe him to be, then why would he feel the need to repent?

There are a number of answers to this question... for starters, we've been told that John was a man "sent from God" to prepare the Jewish people for the coming of the Messiah, so by embracing his own identity as a member of the community of faith and submitting to John's baptism, Jesus was simply obeying God. But also, in this act of intentional subordination to God's will, he also intentionally stood in solidarity with us—he joined the crowd—he walked out to the river—maybe he stood in a long line... In this act, he fully accepted his human identity—he accepted our sin, our ungodliness—our humanity. And in doing so he fulfilled the opening act in God's plan to reconcile with humankind. Listen again to verses five through seven

*<sup>5</sup>Do not fear, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you;*

<sup>6</sup>*I will say to the north, "Give them up,"  
and to the south, "Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth—  
<sup>7</sup>everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made."*

And think what else was happening here – in this One – this Christ, God was calling God’s children home. God was saying “They are out there. They are mine—my beloved sons and daughters, created to glorify me and enjoy me forever, formed by my own hands—but lost, scattered, afraid... You will call them together... In *you* they will be redeemed, called by name, saved from fire and flood... In *you*, my Son... my only Son...I will provide. You are the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

There are limitations to a “Previously on...” introduction to a TV show. A 30-second vignette is never going to provide the richness and complexity of the plotline that came before today’s episode. You’ll understand the basics of the show—you may even enjoy it immensely—but you probably won’t identify—it won’t reach “my story” status unless you make a bigger investment.

Sermons are like that—the preacher has 15 or 20 minutes to give you the gist of something... maybe make you think. But the true *investment* is yours—and it comes in the form of spiritual discipline... spending time with God in prayer, Bible study, remaining in community with fellow Christians and regular worship. The investment is also about telling the story—telling it again and again until this story becomes “*my*” story... and helping others to find their place in it as well. You may think this is primarily the pastor’s responsibility... guess again. Allow me to leave you with something I heard for the first time just a few weeks ago—it’s been attributed to St. Jerome: “Baptism is the ordination of the laity.”

In my Baptism ... in your Baptism... I... you... we were sealed and set aside for service. And we have work to do.

Jesus has already done the heavy lifting—it is in him we are redeemed. But the job is not done:  
God’s children are still scattered,  
still frightened,  
still out there in need of the good news.

...

As inheritors of the promise, we can set aside our fear...  
and with the extravagant love that is ours by grace alone,  
we can help to call them home.

So now, if you will permit me a paraphrase:

...

Thus says the LORD,

...who created you...

...who formed you...

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

You are baptized into me... ordained.

Do not fear...

We have a history together—an identity—a story—and it’s time to tell it.

...

So may it be.

Amen.