

Being the Beloved Child
Baptism of the Lord
January 15, 2017
Trinity Bixby
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Isaiah 42: 1-9
Matthew 3: 13-17

We are living in an amazing time, my friends. Technological marvels surround us – why, just this week, I was able to have a conversation spanning from Alaska to Tulsa to Detroit and even to London, Shanghai, and Jakarta. Last month, Erik reported that the church’s website – trinitychurchbixby.org – was visited by people in 20 different states! There was a time when visitors from 20 different states would have had to coordinate to visit a church – now, it’s easy, and happens almost seamlessly. Let me show you something else that’s amazing – this is an image of the work of the artist Sam Van Aken. He has taken an ancient art and science – horticulture – and found a way to graft stone-fruit trees together. Not just two or three – this is his *Tree of Forty Fruit*. Forty different fruit, all grafted onto the same trunk, sharing the same sap, and the same nutrients. In the spring, it bursts out into a riot of color, like this picture – and in the Summer, its fruit is free for the picking. All forty different kinds – planted together for the enjoyment of everyone, whether you have gold – or locusts. Sam Van Aken has planted over a hundred of these trees so far, in the green areas of cities as far reaching as New York City to Portland, Oregon, and he’s done his best to ensure that the trees will be cared for. As it happens, they don’t need any more care than a fruit tree of a single variety – once the grafted branches are secure, it’s like they are one tree, despite their radically different origins.

The Tree of Forty Fruits is the sort of righteous project that I love to see. Something that offers food for the hungry – for everyone who is hungry. Righteousness, you see, is a combination of justice and mercy. Yes, we may not quite use it that way in English, but the theological concept pre-dates English, so we’re going with the older meaning here! Justice and mercy, combined to make righteousness. That’s the kind of righteousness Jesus describes in the Matthew text this morning when he says – “Allow me to be baptized now. This is

necessary to fulfil all righteousness.” To fulfil the combination of justice and mercy, Jesus had John baptize him. When Jesus tells the disciples in the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 16-20) to “go therefore to all nations, making disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” he’s telling them – and us – to baptize in righteousness, too. To be “baptized in the name of God” means to be chosen to follow in God’s way. To be a little Christ – a Christian – and to be filled with the Holy Spirit as Jesus was.

“But, Pastor Lucus!” (you might say) “I was baptized as a baby, so I don’t remember it all that well – but I’m pretty sure that every baptism I’ve seen since didn’t end up with the heavens opening, a dove descending, and God calling out “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. I find happiness in him!” To which I can only respond – “are you sure? Because you’re certainly familiar with those words!”

As you may know, three of the gospels tell the story of Jesus’ baptism, and the fourth at least mentions that Jesus was baptized by John, even if it doesn’t tell the story directly. In Mark, the earliest of the gospels to be written, God’s voice and descending dove of the Spirit appear only to Jesus. Luke follows suit, leaving only the gospel of Matthew to have God publicly claim Jesus at his baptism. Yet, it’s at this moment in Jesus’ life, as he rose from the waters at John’s urging, that the people first hear about Jesus as God’s beloved Son, and the Spirit manifests with him.

The form of a dove, by the way, is not a usual symbol for the Spirit in the Hebrew Bible. Instead, the dove usually represented the people of Israel themselves – they found identity with the dove sent out by Noah, who returned in peace, carrying an olive branch – representing fruitfulness. Later, in the exile, they found comfort in the mournful cry of the dove, as the Prophets Isaiah (38) and Ezekiel (7) relate. Doves were also sacrificed for atonement in the Temple – and the Talmud and various Targums compares the binding of Isaac to the way doves stretch out their necks before a sacrifice. So, doves represented atonement, sacrifice, mourning, return, and the people of Israel – and later, the Holy Spirit.

The mourning cry of the dove in exile brings us to the verses from Isaiah that we read earlier. In the chapter before, God says to the people: “You, Israel, my servant, I have chosen you and will not cast you off, fear not, for I am with

you, be not dismayed, for I am your God.” When we get to the scripture for today, then, it is read in the context of the exile, with the Servant being (at least originally) identified as the people of Israel. When God says, “My Servant won’t cry out, or shout aloud, or make his voice heard in public,” the term “cry out” is the same used for the mournful cry of the dove. We also see God saying, “Here is my servant, my chosen, my beloved, who brings me delight. I’ve put my Spirit on him, he will bring justice to the nations.” Remember, this originally meant the people of Israel – no longer would they cry out like a dove, because they would bring justice to the nations, and delight to God.

When Jesus is baptized in the gospel of Matthew, God makes these same claims – that had been general – specific to Jesus. “This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I have delight.” The Spirit descends to Jesus in the form of the dove - which meant the whole people of Israel – and if you turn the metaphorical page, immediately leads Jesus into the wilderness for the Temptation, just as the Hebrew people had been led into the wilderness after God reminded them of God’s love for them through Moses in Egypt. What had been general became specific in Matthew’s Gospel – and then general again at the Great Commission.

You see, when you are baptized in the name of God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit, you descend with Jesus into the depths of watery chaos, and rise again with Jesus, into the same Spirit and the same promise of God that Jesus did. John Calvin compared this to being grafted into Christ – your own branch on the shoot of Jesse, the mighty trunk that nourishes you with the same nourishment of your neighbor branches. Yes, you might be an apricot, and your neighbor a plum – but you’re both nourished and supported by the great trunk of Christ. If you were baptized as a child, it’s because your family knew even then that God had called you a beloved child, and wanted to recognize that publicly. If you were baptized as a youth or adult, you made that same statement – that God has called you, and that God has loved you from the very beginning. If you have never been baptized, don’t worry – God calls you a beloved child, also. The Sacrament of Baptism is a public recognition of that love, and an acknowledgement of that grafting, not the act that grafts.

When we are called to remember our baptism, we are called to remember

not only that we are connected, like the branches of the Tree of 40 fruit, but what we are called to do as a result of that connection. In the Servant Song of Isaiah, God goes on to tell us what that is: “I, the Lord, have called you for a good reason. I will grasp your hand and guard you, and give you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to lead the prisoners from prison, and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon.” The first step to overcoming darkness is to open your eyes – and help those around you open their eyes. See the beauty of the tree of life, whose trunk is Jesus, whose branches are you, your neighbor, and everyone’s neighbor stretching back and forward in time – whose nourishment is the Spirit, and whose light is God. Fulfil all righteousness, you beloved child of God – act in justice and mercy, and you will do right by God, and remember, truly, your baptism – the same baptism of Jesus Christ.

May you be bathed in God’s light, that you grow good fruit. May you hold tight to your baptism in Jesus, that you follow his Way. May you be nourished by the Holy Spirit, that you know, truly, that you are a beloved child of God. Amen.