1-11/12-20 God’s Beloved Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 3:13-17

..There is a cartoon of a little boy sitting under a tree with his dog. The boy is reading the Bible.

He reads, "And then a voice came to Moses from above ..."

He turns to his dog and asks, "Have you ever heard a voice from above? "

You can see the dog's thoughts in a bubble above its head: "Attention K-Mart shoppers ... "

-- Homiletics 1-10-93 Listening for God,

 as cited by Bob Olmstead, 3-15-92, Reno, Nevada

Think about all of the voices that compete for your attention. Advertisers entice us to buy the latest product or the best insurance. Media moguls want us to believe their spin on the news.

Family and friends vie for our time. Social media sidetracks our moments. Peers pressure us to do what we often don’t want to do. Teachers and mentors and yes, even pastors share with us expectations on how to live. Some of these voices want us to buy something and some of these voices want us to do something.

Then there are the voices of the past that continue to play through our minds, whether they be from parents or friends, mentors or those who have hurt us. These voices have shaped and influenced who we have become.

If those voices were negative, if those voices were harmful, then we spend a lifetime in fear every time they speak out. They speak to us and say, you’re no good. You’re lazy. You’re dumb. You’re ugly. You’re not worthy. You’re not my equal. You will never amount to anything. You will never be chosen for love.

These negative voices often overshadow the voices of praise that have also shaped and influenced us. Voices that say to us great job. You’re beautiful. What a polite young man you are. What a caring young woman you have become. I’m proud of you. I love you.

.. If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.

If a child lives with hostility she learns to fight.

If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be shy.

If a child lives with shame, she learns to be guilty.

If a child lives with tolerance, he learns to be patient.

If a child lives with encouragement, she learns confidence.

If a child lives with praise, he learns to appreciate.

If a child lives with fairness, she learns justice.

If a child lives with security, he learns to have faith.

If a child lives with approval, she learns to like herself.

If a child lives with acceptance and friendship, he learns to find love in the world.

 --Richard Fairchild rockies.net “God’s Time of Affirmation”

The voices around us and within us, in the past and in the present, impact our lives, in negative and positive ways.

Yet today, in this new year, I invite us all to listen for another voice, the one voice that really matters—the voice of God speaking to us.

No, God probably won’t speak to us in a clear, audible voice. No, God probably won’t respond in a conversational tone like we speak to one another here today. Instead, God will speak to us in other ways—through the Scripture or a song, through another person or a conviction within us.

Throughout the Christmas season, God’s voice said to us: *I am with you.*

Today, God’s voice declares to us: *You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter.*

*I delight in you.*

From the beginning of time, the Bible reminds us that God named and claimed humanity as the beloved children of God. First it was Adam and Eve named as God’s beloved creation in the Garden of Eden. Then it was Abraham and the people Israel claimed as God’s chosen race.

Even when God’s people turned away from God, God continued to reach out in love and hope and grace. And when Jesus came to earth, God named and claimed all of humanity as God’s beloved children- Jew and Gentile, male and female, old and young, slave and free.

God names and claims us because God’s nature is to love. Like a mother who loves the child whom she carries and births and like a father who loves even a wayward son, God loves each and every one of us with abundant and agape love. God will never leave us or abandon us or tell us we are unlovable, but will seek to surround us with love.

God does not love us because we love God first. No, God loves us first. Yet how often do we think we need to earn God’s love? How often do we think we have to say and do the right things in order to earn our way into heaven? We’ve turned faith into works righteousness.

Yet that is not the way God’s love works. We don’t need to earn God’s love. God does not love us because of what we do. God loves us simply because we are. Faith then is our response to God’s love. Faith then is how we choose to love God and love others to show and share God’s great love for us.

Yet before we can love others, we need to listen to and claim God’s words of love to us here today. *You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. I delight in you.*

These are the same words Jesus heard at his baptism.

Scripture doesn’t say how Jesus spent the first 30 years of his life. But around the age of 30, when John the Baptist was bluntly calling on all Judea to repent and be baptized, Jesus suddenly showed up along the riverbank, wanting to be baptized by his cousin.

John had been that wild looking prophet in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John had been prophesying that the kingdom of heaven was drawing near and soon, God’s messenger would arrive. Only this was no ordinary messenger, but one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. One who would cleanse false living and false believing.

After all of this bold talk, no wonder John is unhappy when Jesus arrived at the riverbank and wanted John to baptize him. John feels unworthy. John wants Jesus to display his power there and then. He wants Thor to appear, not Mr. Rogers.

Naturally, John objected, “I’m the one who needs to be baptized, not *you*!”

But Jesus insisted. “Do it. God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.”

The Gospel of Matthew is filled with the many ways Jesus fulfills the promise of Scripture. This moment is no different. Jesus comes to “fulfill all righteousness.” He comes to do what God wants regardless of how it looked to others. He comes to connect the world with God’s saving, compassionate grace. He comes to offer a path for sinners back to a right relationship with God. Although Jesus had no need for a baptism of repentance, being the sinless one, he wanted to be baptized to identify with sinful people in need of grace.

Imagine the passion of John and the patience of Jesus in that theological discussion along the riverbank! Finally, John consented. He may not have been too happy about it, but he let go of his way to allow for God’s way in that moment.

Next, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan River. Matthew gives no description of the actual event. We can only imagine. Most likely, Jesus looked like any other Jew coming for baptism that day. Ordinary. Willing. The gospel writers give us few details.

They do, however, give details as to what happened next. The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God’s Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, he heard a voice:

*“This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.”*

*“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”*

Only after his baptism, only after hearing God’s affirmation, did Jesus’ ministry begin.

Only after this moment did he begin to call his disciples, welcome the outcast, heal the sick, proclaim the ways of God and journey to the cross.

Imagine how those words of affirmation continued to support Jesus when his ministry was questioned, when his words were rejected, when he was abandoned by his closest followers, when he gave up his life on the cross.

*You are my beloved son. I delight in you.*

Jesus’ lived into his identity affirmed at his baptism.

How do we recognize and live into our identity as God’s beloved? And how does that identity make a difference in our lives?

Living now one town over from where I grew up, I cannot forget whose daughter I am. Anyone who grew up in Franklin in the 70s knew my father. Sometimes people simply look at me and ask, are you John Palmer’s daughter? I had that happen once in Edwards Furniture, and once in the parking lot at Anderson’s Funeral Home! Looking at my kids, even though they don’t have the Palmer name, people expect them to carry on the musical genes that run in my family. Thankfully you know they do.

Sometimes, we have been given names that offer promise and possibility. How many of you were named after a family member, or a person your parents honored? How many of you were named after biblical characters, hoping you would be strong in faith? How many of you have had expectations placed upon you simply because you carry a certain name?

Sometimes, we have been given names that are hurtful. Sometimes, people have given us labels that have limited our potential. How have we lived into a negative identity because of the words of others?

When family expectations threaten to overwhelm us, when negative labels seek to hold us back, no matter what burdens and blessings our given names may be, today we are called to claim a new identity—the identity of God’s beloved child.

God says to you today: *You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. I delight in you.*

Give thanks that God loves you no matter who you are, what you struggle with, what names you carry. You are loved by God because you are you. Period. Not because of what you have and have not done.

Jesus heard that word of identity and blessing at his baptism. That word of identity and blessing comes to us through the waters of our baptisms, regardless if we are baptized as an infant, youth or adult.

Through the waters of baptism we are offered a new identity that has nothing to do with what earthly family we were born into or married into, and has nothing to do with what ministries we are involved in and how we live our faith.

Through the waters of baptism God claims us as God claimed Jesus, as beloved sons and beloved daughters. God offers us prevenient grace not because we have earned it or deserve it.

We are claimed and cleansed and called forth by faith because God is God and God is love.

Baptism is more than an entertaining moment in worship or a family tradition. If we take seriously that we have been cleansed and claimed through the waters of baptism, baptism is the beginning of our journeys of faith.

I was less than a month old when I was baptized. There is no way I can remember that moment.

Yet, I can remember each and every day that I was baptized. And when I remember that I was baptized, I can give thanks. I have been forgiven my sins. And God continues to offer forgiveness and new life. I have been welcomed into the family of God. And I can claim my place in that family through the community of faith, the church. I have been claimed as God’s beloved. As I give thanks, I am now called to live into this new name, into this new identity, as God’s beloved. I am called to keep moving closer to God on the journey of faith.

When we claim the name of God’s beloved, then we are called to live as God’s beloved.

Brett Younger reminds us

...If we are true to our baptisms, we cannot make ourselves comfortable, cannot do only what will be appreciated, and cannot be satisfied with the way things are. Our baptisms demand that we struggle with what’s right and what’s wrong, what’s important and what’s not. The children of God tell the truth in a world that lies, give in a world that takes, love in a world that lusts, make peace in a world that fights, serve in a world that wants to be served, pray in a world that waits to be entertained, and take chances in a world that worships safety. The baptized are citizens of an eccentric community where financial success is not the goal, security is not the highest good, and sacrifice is a daily event.

-Brett Younger “The First Step” 12-9-19 ministrymatters.com

Baptism is God’s claiming of us. Faith is our willingness to live into our identity as God’s beloved. Faith is our willingness to live into the vows spoken by us or over us at our baptisms.

Are we willing to follow Jesus while rejecting the evil powers of this world, accepting the power God gives us to resist injustice and oppression, and living in union with the church opened to all ages, nations and races?

We can live into those words because we are God’s beloved!

We can make a difference in this world because God has loved us!

In this new year, this is our mission, if we are willing to accept it.

To live into our identity as God’s beloved sons and daughters.

To love others in ways that show and share the love we have received.

To live into our baptismal vows. To make a difference in this world.

Consider these words a pastor once spoke over an infant at her baptism:

.."Little sister, by this act of baptism, we welcome you to a journey that will take your whole life. This isn't the end. It's the beginning of God's experiment with your life. What God will make of you, we know not. Where God will take you, surprise you, we cannot say. This we do know and this we say -- God is with you."

 --William B. Kincaid, III, “And then Came the Angel,”

 CSS Publishing Company, sermons.com, adapted

*You are beloved sons. You are beloved daughters. God delights in you.*

Claim these words for your life today.

And now, go with the blessing spoken at every one of our services of baptism:

*The Holy Spirit work within you,*

*that having been born through water and the Spirit,*

*you may live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.*

May it be so. Let us pray.