

and at every point in between. That love makes life worth living; the love of the savior makes life meaningful even when things seem mundane or hard or out of control. We don't earn the love to begin with. And we can't ever lose it.

This truth, those six words, still raise many questions, the same way life does. And like the crowd, we should keep asking our questions, keep pondering them, keep figuring out how the Messiah matters in this complicated world we inhabit. As we do that, I hope you can always find some answers to your questions at the font, in the waters of baptism, and in the reminder of the presence of the Holy Spirit that claims you in love.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

January 9, 2022

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

“Great Questions, and a Six Word Story”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Luke 3:15-22

Luke opens this story in the crowd. So often in the gospels I ignore the crowds. We focus on the main action - Jesus, the disciples, the Pharisees. The crowds are there, but we pay them no mind. They're part of the scenery if we notice them at all. But this crowd got my attention, as they pressed in on John, wondering about a coming Messiah who was so very near. They were talking together, asking questions, wondering out loud. Maybe there were some theological and political arguments. This passage does a good job of reminding us that Jesus' world knew no distinction between religion and public life. John's religion was bound up with Herod's political rule. In the crowd, certainly some wise old rabbis were there, throwing barbs at each other about when and where scripture said the Messiah would emerge. Children were pointing at John and asking "is this guy really that important?" The crowd's questions about John, and about the Messiah, were many. They were looking to the future with wonder and with longing for what it might hold. I suspect they especially wondered what the Messiah meant for them. What would a savior mean for their everyday existence? For their families? For trying to make ends meet and raise children and sustain themselves later in life? How would God's anointed one make a difference to them?

That's what a lot of people today want to know, too. Does it make a difference? What does a savior mean for my daily routine - going to work, getting the car an oil change, picking up the grandkids at school, saving for retirement, losing a job and looking for a new one, dealing with doctors, worrying about the state of the world? Is the news about Jesus true, our hearts ask? Has the light of the world come? Is the Kingdom of Heaven really at hand? And if so, *so what?*

¹ <https://www.sixwordmemoirs.com/about/>

Some faith traditions say questions are bad. Or they only allow certain kinds of questions. Presbyterians are different. We have always valued education, inquiring minds, and wondering out loud. We believe a living faith is full of questions. The spiritual life is enriched by seeking together. Our faith is not so flimsy that it is threatened by tough questions. A popular children's ministry curriculum called Godly Play is based around asking questions that start with "I wonder" as a Bible story is read. I wonder what Jesus meant by that? I wonder who was there that day? I wonder what it feels like to be loved by God? The crowd's questions are like that. They are not meant as critique. They're not trying to punch a hole in someone's argument or beliefs. They are meant to explore, to bring meaning, to deepen understanding.

Luke only tells us about *the crowd's* questions. We don't know what kind of wondering Jesus was doing about his ministry or his life ahead. But since he was fully human, surely he must have had some questions. And whatever they were, the Holy Spirit showed up at his baptism to answer them. As Luke tells it, "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, [then] the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove." What seems to matter most was God opening the heavens; God showing up in a tangible way. Then God's voice spoke to Jesus "You are my son, the Beloved. With you, I am well pleased." In some of the gospels the crowd heard the voice, too. But here, we're led to believe it was probably Jesus alone who heard it. I wonder if the voice of the Spirit answered Jesus' questions? I wonder if that voice confirmed what he thought about himself or transformed his understanding of who he was? Jesus was thirty years old, but maybe, like us, at that age he was still wondering about himself and the amazing and hard things he'd been called to do in the life he had been given. Whatever his wonderings were, the voice of the Spirit tried to answer them all with just a few words: "You are my son, the Beloved."

There is a legend that Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write an entire story in just six words. His response was poignant, "For sale, baby shoes, never worn." In 2006, Larry Smith challenged readers of his SMITH magazine to write their own life story in just six words.¹ People jumped into the challenge with raw honesty as well as humor. "Cursed with cancer; blessed with friends." "I still make coffee for two." "Married by Elvis, divorced by Friday." Have you counted the words in Luke's six word story yet? "You are my son, the Beloved." It's

only six short words, but it tells the whole story. It seems to answer every question, or at least the most important ones.

At baptism, God's voice answers our most important questions, too, and in a very similar way. The waters of baptism boldly declare that we are beloved. "You are my child, my beloved," the Spirit whispers. God wants to be in loving relationship with us, regardless of what happens in our lives tomorrow or next year or in 50 years. This is the radical news of baptism. The heavens are opened and unshakeable love showers down on us.

When I say that those six words answer every question we have, I'm only exaggerating a little. Everything we wonder and worry about for ourselves - am I good enough? Will I succeed? What if I don't get in? What if I fail?: all the answers to those questions are rooted in the knowledge that we are loved, regardless of how we succeed or how we fall short. All our worries about our self-worth or whether our lives mean anything at all find their answer at the font.

Which is also to say that the crowd's question and ours - does the Messiah mean anything for me? - also gets its answer here. That answer is *yes*. Because Jesus Christ is God's *yes* to us, to the world, to love unconditional, then this savior does impact our everyday lives. Through the love we are given in him, our greatest accomplishments and our mundane activities find dignity and worth. On the days where we simply rest and exist, we still matter just as much to God. God's love doesn't ever wash off.

For Jesus, the words of the Spirit answered his questions and affirmed that he was Savior, Messiah, Anointed One. God's love at his baptism allowed him to be Hope for the innocent and vulnerable. Bringer of justice. The One who forgives freely. Even the questions of death could not put a stop to God's love. The tomb itself could not contain the six word story God was telling through Jesus. To the baptismal font, parents bring their greatest fears and worries for their children; they bring their questions about who their child will become; they bring their wonderings about what this life will bring. Then God opens the heavens, a pastor's hand sprinkles water, and God answers all those questions by telling a child they are beloved. We do this not just for children, but also teenagers and adults, so sometimes the questions we bring are for our own lives. For all of us, old or young, life will bring many more questions, more joys and sorrows than we can imagine. But the answer doesn't change; the story doesn't change. God's love is true for us, and for any baptized person, then and now