

For What Else Were We Born?

January 9, 2022

The Baptism of our Lord

The Reverend Jay Sanderford

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Not too long ago there was a series on National Public Radio titled “This I Believe.” The short segments engaged listeners in an exploration of the core beliefs that guided their daily lives. I recall hearing from people of all walks of life — the very young and the very old, the previously unknown, and the famous—Muhammad Ali, novelist Amy Tan, physician and activist Dr. Paul Farmer. Most of the “This I Believe” segments were positive and uplifting: “I Believe in the Strength of Community” and I really adored “Finding Hope in Hip Hop.” But one compelling credo shook me to the core. It began, “I believe in our innate potential for brutality.”

The speaker was Yinong Young-Xu, who immigrated to the United States from China when he was 16. He’s now an epidemiologist with an advanced degree from Harvard. In his statement he said: “When I was 6, in the streets of Shanghai, near the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, I watched a parade of trucks carrying political dissidents on their way to be publicly executed. At the front of each truck was a young man, roped from head to toe, wearing a sign that said “Counter-Revolutionary.” If not for that, you would have had trouble guessing what the event was. There was an air of festivity; bystanders were laughing and pointing at the prisoners. The whole population of Shanghai must have been there. It was like a traditional Chinese New Year’s celebration — except the city was celebrating its own brutality.”

Xu continues, “I believe that we can be brutal because innocence can be corrupted.”¹

On reflection, Yinong believed that he was fortunate — too young to be fully indoctrinated, and profoundly influenced by a compassionate grandmother who reinforced the importance of kindness in him. That’s why he raised his own children to be compassionate, to aid the needy, and to stand up for the downtrodden. “Most of all,” he said on the air, “I try to be vigilant. I believe I must guard against my own potential for brutality.”

We look at the world today and what do we see? Deep and persistent racial divides. Political speech aimed at disparaging those with whom we disagree. Systemic injustice. Yinong Young-Xu and a host of others are surely right: It is crucial to teach kindness to our children and guard against the corruption of our humanity. It seems all the more vital, in these cold winter days when the pandemic seems to be in control.

¹ “A Potential for Brutality,” Yinong Young-Xu, All Things Considered, National Public Radio. March 5, 2007, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7693473>

My own children's need for love and a measure of kindness astounds me, even though they now navigate life in their thirties and amid the waters of family, children, work and community. When they were younger and I was home to tuck them in bed, we fashioned a bedtime ritual that each one found comforting. Before tucking them into bed for the night, I would read them each, separately, Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon*. Next would come Sandra Boynton's *The Going to Bed Book*; you can join in if you remember as a whole gang of clever animals get ready for bed:

*"The sun has set not long ago,
Now everyone goes below to take a bath in one big tub.
With soap all over, "scrub, scrub, scrub..."
They hang their towels on the wall, and find pajamas big and small.
With some on top and some beneath, they brush and brush and brush their teeth."
... After a little exercise, the poignant little book ends...
"The moon is high. The sea is deep. They rock and rock and rock to sleep.
The day is done, they say goodnight and someone turns out the light."*²

After the ritual of the books ended, I'd help tuck them in for the night, and often sit on the edge of their beds. In the moonlight they would we'd talk about their day and hold space for them to speak about their dreams. I would eventually pull away for some time with my wife and a good book. Now, as adults, they still want my love, all of it, as a steady rhythmic drumbeat to their ongoing search for wholeness. Even a child who is well-loved is at any age, insatiably hungry for more.

In his book, *My Bright Abyss*, Christian Wiman writes about this love: "In any true love – a mother's for her child, a husband's for his wife, a friend's for a friend – there is an excess energy that always wants to be in motion. Moreover, it seems to move not simply from one person to another but through them, toward something else. This is why we can be so baffled and overwhelmed by such love: it wants to be more than it is; it cries out inside of us to make it more than it is. And what it is crying out for, finally, is its essence and origin: God."³

The energy of love is, as Wiman says, baffling and overwhelming. It always wants to be more. This is where God steps in. In Luke's surprisingly brief account of Jesus' baptism, the words that stand out are God's words, spoken from heaven as Jesus emerges from the water, "***You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased***" (Luke 3:22). These sacred words of affirmation, love and praise from Father to Son stand out in stark contrast to John's vision of a Messiah who will appear with a winnowing fork in hand, poised to separate the wheat from the chaff. The words of God's love are the words that will sustain us. Especially in days like this when the grief is real and raw, and the noise of the pandemic reigns supreme.

Luke's genealogy for Jesus follows this story of baptism is admittedly bland reading, but testifies to Jesus' full humanity. He comes from people much like those who line up with him by the river to be baptized. People who can't get enough love. People who need to hear words of affirmation and encouragement, words of grace, forgiveness and

² "The Going to Bed Book," Sandra Boynton. (Little Simon: revised edition. New York, Nov. 30, 1982).

³ "My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer," Christian Wiman. (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, reprint edition, New York, April 1, 2014).

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hope. People who wrestle with the tragic premature deaths of joyous, effervescent friends and colleagues. The message of love Jesus receives at baptism sustains him in the wilderness of temptation, through his public ministry, his suffering and his horrific death.

Luke downplays the physical baptism, instead fixing our attention on what Jesus did immediately afterward. ***“When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying.”*** Jesus was praying. And then –then! – the heavens opened. The actual Greek verb translated as ***“opened”*** borders on the violent; it is more like ***“ripped open.”*** If something opens, it can close easily. But if it’s ripped open, lots of luck getting it closed! All the edges of the thing are ripped, tattered and raw, and near impossible to put back together again. It’s through that permanently ripped open heaven, the Spirit descends on Jesus, ***“in bodily form”*** Luke says, like a dove. And the voice: ***“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”***

These words can sustain us too, but we also need parents, pastors, friends and loved ones to remind us, often, that we are loved. ***“You are my child, a Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*** Too often, the world’s overwhelming message is that we are not good enough, not worthy, not deserving of love. But the message Jesus received in his baptism is the message for every person in line behind him. You are loved. You are enough.

You are God’s beloved. You are God’s creation, with whom God is well pleased.

If you will on this day, turn to your neighbor, look them in the eye, and say.... You are God’s beloved. With you God is well pleased.

On this Sunday at First Pres, the day of the Baptism of our Lord meshes neatly with the Ordination and Installation of Deacons and Elders, but it collides headlong into the death of our sibling-in-Christ, Rev. Matthew J. Warfield, who died in the early hours of Saturday morning. Matthew J. died too early, was ripped from this life far too soon. Jesus’ baptism, and Matthew’s own baptism when he was about ten years old, tell us that Matthew was deeply loved. And that Matthew J was enough. He was God’s beloved child. He was God’s creation; he was a child with whom God was well pleased. When Matthew J was submerged beneath the waters of a church member’s swimming pool as a young boy by Pastor Eric Gray, the waters of that baptismal pool claimed him to become one of God’s own. His watery immersion sealed him to show that he belongs to God. In baptism, God freed Matthew from sin and death, uniting him with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. When we remember our baptism on days like today, we are, by way of water and the Holy Spirit, again made members of the church, the body of Christ, and joined to Christ’s ministry of love, peace, and justice. From that day of his baptism forward, and every day since then, I believe that Matthew J.’s life and witness shimmered with the love and joy of God. It was joy and exuberance that spilled out

of heaven when the barrier was ripped open at that first baptism of Jesus, and it is that love and mercy that continues to flow from the heart of God out to the world to this day.

A true light has gone dim with Matthew J.'s death, but strangely enough I can also find some encouragement in noting that in spite of the shadows and darkness of this pandemic hour, there are indeed sparks of light and reconciliation like Matthew J. alive in the world today. And in them, I confess that I find the ingredients for hope and courage.

By way of example, earlier this year, a small town in France received a one-million-dollar bequest from the estate of an Austrian man. The one-million-dollar gift came from the estate of Eric Schwam who died earlier this year at age 90. In 1943, as a boy, he had come to the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. Like other Jews fleeing the Nazis, the Schwam family had found welcome, safety and shelter there.⁴ I first learned of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon years ago when one of my college roommates read "*Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*," Philip Hallie's study of the community's heroism. Hallie spent years trying to discover what led villagers to do such an extraordinary thing at such great personal risk. He found that much of their education had come from the teachings of the village church and from its pastor, André Trocmé, and his wife, Magda. Week after week Pastor Trocmé proclaimed the Word, and each week the members of the parish came to understand something of their call to discipleship and faithfulness. Over time, by nurtured habit, the people came to know what to do. When Nazis came to town looking for Jews, the people of Le Chambon quietly did what was right, sheltering their Jewish siblings from evil.

One older woman, who faked a heart attack when the Nazis came to search her house, said later, "Pastor always taught us that there comes a time in every life when a person is asked to do something for Jesus." Another woman, when asked why she would risk her life for the sake of total strangers, replied, "For what else was I born?"⁵ Today as we are ordaining and installing a new cohort of Deacons and Elders, I am contemplating what forms the lives and shimmering gifts of faithful women and men, including gifted young pastors like Rev. Matthew J. Warfield. I am pondering the reality that we are called to leadership in hard times.

I am also wondering about the difference between cruelty and courage and how to accentuate the one and shrink the other. The difference, I believe, lies in the teaching of compassion — the capacity to see the other as we see ourselves, to recognize our common humanity, and to reach out to the other's hunger and pain. Compassion is the sometimes-fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.

Even further, the difference lies in the teaching of Christian compassion — that capacity for seeing one's own face mirrored in the face of another and recognizing there, upon closer examination, the very face of Christ.

For what else were we born?

⁴ "For What Else Were We Born?" Robert E. Dunham, *The Presbyterian Outlook*. May 3, 2021. I am indebted to Bob Dunham for some of the ideas and resources that inspired this sermon, and for reacquainting me with the story of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon as told by Philip Hallie.

⁵ "*Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There.*" Philip P. Hallie (Penguin Books, New York, April 8, 1994).