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### **Baptism of Our Lord: 42:1-9, Psalm 29, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:13-17**

Water in one form or another (atmospheric rivers, bomb cyclones, king tides, flooding, snow and ice storms) has been front and center for many of us and many around the country and world the past few weeks. It is front and center in the gospel today, as well, in a seemingly less dramatic way, as Jesus and John encounter one another at the Jordan River. Let's dive in, so to speak, to this moment where, they engage in a bit of a back and forth about who should baptize whom, a seemingly small decision before the real action of the baptism begins. But since it is the first time Jesus speaks in the gospel of Matthew, maybe not.

We know John as the radical desert prophet who challenges the status quo and calls all those around him to repent and participate in a bigger vision of the kingdom of God. John was accustomed to upsetting the traditional religious, social and cultural hierarchy, speaking truth to power and making good trouble on behalf of the kingdom of God, yet in this pre-Baptism moment, Jesus gently challenges John's words (maybe almost said under his breath) that Jesus should be baptizing him.

Right from the start, Jesus pushes back against John's inclination to put him at the top, making it clear that the vision of God for this world goes way beyond what even John has imagined. As visionary and radical as John is, he is still thinking in a hierarchical way that seeks to put someone—Jesus—at the top. Even though the religious authorities definitely get moved to the bottom of the hierarchy—a well-deserved re-shuffling, many might say—John, at least here, is stuck with a fixed, hierarchical mindset of who should be on top and who belongs at the bottom. In response to that, Jesus basically says, “Nope. do not just replace the authorities and elites by putting me at the pointy top of the pyramid.

Right from the start, Jesus aims to initiate a whole new way of looking at and being in the world. The key word (which will come up again and again and again in our journey through Matthew) is on bringing about God's *righteousness*, not on figuring out who is righteous and who is not. The NRSV translation (what we use) has Jesus using these words to explain why John will baptize him: “It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” The New English Translation says: “This is how it should be, because we must do all God wants us to do.” And the Inclusive Bible puts it this way: “We must do this to completely fulfill God's justice.” The difference is very, very subtle, but essential. In his first words, Jesus sets forth his 12-word vision and mission statement (depending on which translation you choose) for all that is to follow: “It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” We are called to righteousness—to establish God's dream of justice in this world for all—not to focus on re-ordering the hierarchy (which typically results in short-term results). This distinction between being individually righteous and fulfilling righteousness will be confusing and distorted and forgotten

frequently by his disciples and all those who interact with him for the rest of his life and beyond, on down through the years.

I wonder if John and Jesus, in this brief exchange, were standing at the river's edge, or maybe they were already ankle-deep in the water. As much as he had been baptizing people, perhaps John had forgotten, for a moment, about the water. I am reminded, in this moment, of a different form of water. An iceberg. Bear with me here for just a moment, to travel from the river to a place with icebergs. (Breathe, travel and imagine.) If John was thinking of a pyramid. Jesus might have been thinking about an iceberg. As you know, only a small portion of an iceberg—about 10%-15% can be seen above the waterline.

Icebergs are on our minds perhaps mostly in terms of climate change. But they have also been a helpful way for people to explore and talk about identity. To explore the 10%-15% of who we are that is above surface and readily available for everyone to see, along with the 85%-90% of our fuller selves that is under the surface, not readily known or understood. In iceberg identity conversations (many of you have probably done this), it starts with each person drawing a facet of the iceberg for each part of their identity, demarcating the waterline of what is above and below the surface. They end up looking like gemstones. Recently, I saw 8-9 year old iceberg drawings. Some of the above-water facets they had identified included: gray eyes, wear glasses, medium height, pale white skin. Below-water facets, essential parts of their identity that people wouldn't necessarily know about them were: I like warm colors, I am very good at math, I have a sister who died, people don't know about the arguments I get into, I don't know if I believe in God, I love nature, my gender is sometimes 'he.' As you think about yourself, what parts of your identity are readily visible to other people? What parts of your identity—who you are and what matters to you—are under the surface.

In today's gospel, it might seem as though all of the action is above water, but it is under the water that Jesus's deeper, core identity is revealed, named, affirmed: Beloved. "This is my Own, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Also 12 words. But really 1 word. Beloved. "So much of the life of Jesus is hidden: his walks to the wilderness; his early mornings..the sound of his voice; the words he said underneath his breath; the sound of his breath." (see Pdraig O Tuama, *Daily Prayers*) So much of who we are is hidden as well. But this 1 word is the word that is spoken to each of us. Beloved. I say that knowing that many of us struggle to hear God's voice under the waters, in the deepest corners of our being, saying, "You are my Beloved." It is a deepest truth in the deepest part of our being.

It is so important that these words are spoken, whispered, shouted (I don't know which!) before Jesus has accomplished anything that we know about. We have no idea what he has been up to, other than being born. Going under water to this place of deepest identity is the starting point for everything. It is as if the Face-of-the-Deep is saying, to Jesus—and all of us in this moment: If you hear nothing else. If you have no other experience of me than this. If you wandered into St. Augustine-in-the-Woods today (virtually or in-person) and this is your only moment in this church or any church for the

rest of your lives, know this: You are beloved. All of who you are. And, by extension that means that every person you meet is beloved. And this whole earth is beloved. Fulfilling all righteousness (justice) stems from that core belief. That's what baptism is about.

We will renew our baptismal vows in just a minute. Whether the words are familiar or strange, or whether they feel as though they are narrowing or broadening for you, hear these words of the gospel: You are my Beloved. As Beloved community, let us fulfill justice.