

January 8, 2023  
The Baptism of Our Lord  
Year A  
Matthew 3:13-17  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### Beloved

When I was a little girl, and it got to be evening on Christmas Day, my grandma would inevitably say something that really upset me. She would say some variation of, “Well, now, haven’t we had a nice Christmas.” While it was completely true, every year, that our Christmas Day, to that point had been a lovely Christmas, full of fun and laughter and generosity, and good food and good friends and happiness, I never wanted to confront the idea that it was over. So, I would say, something like, “But Grandma, Christmas isn’t over yet. Christmas isn’t over until midnight.”

When I was younger, I said it in real distress, not wanting to be shortchanged even a minute of a magical Christmas Day. When I was older it got to be something of a joke between us. And then, of course, I learned more about the church year, in college and seminary, and I came to understand the fact that the song, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, wasn’t just a song for Christmas carolers to drive people crazy with, but was a song that told a truth about the church calendar, Christmas is not a day, but a twelve day season. I got to tease my Grandma about that for years too.

But, now, though it might pain me to admit it, Christmas is officially over. It ended, in fact, last Thursday, on January 5<sup>th</sup>, the Twelfth Day of Christmas.

The story of the wise men coming to find the baby Jesus, to bring gifts to the new King of the Jews, is to most of us, a Christmas story, but in the

church year, it is an Epiphany story and Epiphany is its very own festival, celebrated on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

So, haven't we had a nice Christmas?

I must say that of all of the fun and joyful things that I did this Christmas a highlight for me this year was our Christmas Eve worship services in person and on Zoom. I always love Christmas Eve worship, but this year there seemed to be a special sparkle, a special joy, a special blessing to our worship together.

Beyond that, I don't know how your Christmas season was. Nice? Wonderful? Busy? Hectic? Tiring? Sad? Joyful? A letdown?

One thing that I can say about this Christmas, other than our shared communal experience of beautiful worship together that might be true for all of us, is that it was fast. Advent doesn't feel that far away and here we are with Christmas in our rear view mirrors and rapidly approaching the middle of January. Haven't we had a fast Christmas? And perhaps nothing will make us feel that quickness, feel that speed than today's worship service.

Our worship service today began with the wise men searching for a baby, a child born king of the Jews and then, fast forward, that baby, the baby who the wise men found and knelt before and offered gifts, in our second gospel reading for today appears before us as a full-grown man, thirty years old, finding John at the Jordan river, to be baptized by him.

A mother friend of mine, who had children who were just a little bit older than mine, said to me once, when I was in the throes of raising young children. "The days are long, but the years are short." And I have found that to be very true. Those days of diapers and high chairs and toddlers and potty training and PBS kids and noisy toys and nursery rhymes did feel very long at

the time when they were going on and now they're a blur, a fuzzy memory, in my house full of teens and tweens and ear buds and computers and drivers ed and college. Do I know now not to blink as we race from firsts to lasts?

This past Wednesday, our Confirmation lesson was focused on the church year. And of course, there was one kid in the class who debated with me about it. The debater happened to be related to me and he couldn't understand why we went so quickly from our celebration of Christmas to our celebration of Jesus' baptism. I mean, for us, Lutherans, it makes sense to celebrate a baptism soon after a birth, but my Confirmation student knew that Jesus was baptized as an adult, at thirty years old and he couldn't understand why we would skip so much time in Jesus' life.

For Mary and Joseph, it might have been true that the days were long, but certainly, for us in the church, as we celebrate the church year, the years were short. In fact, I told my Confirmation student, the years, in terms of scriptural record, were almost non-existent. There are very few stories about Jesus' childhood and all but a couple of them take place when Jesus is a baby.

If we only had one gospel, the gospel of Mark, then we would know nothing about Jesus' early days, Christmas might not even exist as a festival, because he tells us nothing about Jesus before he shows up at the Jordan River to be baptized by John.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke give us more of the story, more to think about, more to celebrate. But still, it all seems to go by so quickly and now, that baby that we were so recently coming to adore is a grown man, about to start a ministry that will lead all too quickly, to a cross and a tomb.

Jesus' actual ministry took three years. We will cover those events, as they are told us, primarily in the gospel of Matthew in just three months. The days are long, the years are short.

The waters of the baptismal river that Jesus steps into with John, feel definitely more like rapids, than like a stagnant pool, waters ready to rush Jesus into what's next for him, into the work that he has come to do, into the plans that God has for him and for the world.

And sometimes it feels like that for us too, like we are in the rapids, being rushed along in the river of life, sometimes spinning out of control, sometimes crashing into rocks, sometimes thrilling to the ride, like a kid who loves the speed and spins and drops of a waterslide.

But as we take off into a new year, into a new season of the church into time that is called ordinary, but in truth, never is, we have this moment to pause with Jesus as he stands knee deep in the Jordan, and seeks baptism from John.

This is how Jesus starts his ministry and even John knows that it's strange. He's been advertising the baptism that he offers as one of repentance. He has been calling people to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2). He's been calling people to confess their sins, to be washed in the water, to change their lives. But when Jesus stands before him in the water, John pulls back. He knows who Jesus is, he sees his holiness; John knows that Jesus is the one that he has been waiting for, the one that the world has been waiting for, the more powerful one, the righteous judge, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John wants Jesus to baptize him, not the other way around, but Jesus insists, insists on receiving

John's baptism, a baptism of repentance for one who has no need of repentance.

So, John relents, and Jesus is baptized and when he comes out of the water, the heavens are opened, a dove descends, and a voice from heaven announces, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

Those are words for us to take with us into this new year. Because they tell us who Jesus is and what he is, but they tell us even more than that. They tell us who we are, and what we are, and what it means that Jesus was born for us, and was baptized, and lived for us and died for us.

Jesus is the beloved one, but so are we. We can know that we are beloved because God the Son, came to be with us, to be born as we are, to live not among the great and powerful, but with the humble, the ordinary, with those threatened by power, to grow up in a family, with a mother and father, with sisters and brothers, with all of the challenges and tensions and laughter and love of an ordinary life, to work a job, for years, and then at age thirty to join us at the river, and, though he had no sin, nothing to repent, to be baptized, as we have been, to step into the rapids of life for us, and all that had come before and all that came after that moment, when the water flowed over him, tells us who we are, tells us that we are beloved, that the earth is beloved, that all people, that those we love and those we name as our enemies, that all of God's precious creation is beloved. For God so loved the world that Jesus, the beloved one, the beloved Son, came and lived with us and hallowed all of life.

There is a practice the I have heard of, of people selecting or even being given a word to live into for a new year, a word that should guide their choices and their reflections on their life experiences throughout the year. I have never given much thought to that practice, but now, on this Sunday, so early in the year of our Lord, 2023, we hear a word that I hope that we can all take with us into whatever this new year holds for us. That word is “beloved”, for the beloved one has come to dwell with us and we, too, are beloved.

As the waters of this year rush along, into whatever joys or hardships it brings to us, that is the truth we can cling to. Jesus’ presence for us and with us tell us that we, too, are God’s children, we, too, are God’s beloved. Thanks be to God. Amen.