



TAKEN BY THE HAND
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 43:1-9; MATTHEW 3: 13-17
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
January 8, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' 15But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. 16And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Baptism is something the sing about.

Coming to the Table is something to sing about.

We sing when we are filled with joy.

We sing when we cannot but speak of our yearning, our need for God.

We sing of our hunger and thirst for justice, for God's mercy

We sing our gratitude. We sing our sorrow.

We sing our hopes and dreams.

We sing our story.



4 "I was there to hear your born-ing cry; I'll be there when you are old.



I re-joiced the day you were bap-tized to see your life un - fold."

I don't have conscious memory of my baptism.

My grandfather baptized me when I was a baby, just like he baptized my three older sisters before me, and one more sister after me. Just like my father's grandfather had baptized him. And just like my father baptized all his grandchildren.

Baptism is not a rite of passage in our faith tradition. And it is not a golden ticket to heaven. Baptism is sign and seal of what is already true about us—that God's love circles us and forms and informs our lives before and beyond any choices we might make. Baptism helps to frame and define our story—not change our story into one that includes God, but to color in the vividness of God's careful and faithful presence in our lives. And it invites the community of faith to be part of how the children of God learn who we are.

Whether you have memories of your baptism or not, the invitation to remember is not an invitation to recall a narrative memory, but an invitation to deeply remember an existential truth—you are God's beloved child. You are embraced, accepted, and loved because God knows you better than anyone else. God's been there all along and God will be there forevermore.

As Jesus followers, your story, my story, our story is stitched together with God's creative and steady love.

Moments, crossroads, epiphanies, and watersheds—some may come to mind for you right now if you allow them to surface:

- those moments in time that are rich and thick with clarity about who you are and who God is,
- those moments rich and thick with how God is moving, breathing, luring, inviting, troubling, consoling,
- those moments rich and thick with how God is telling you again who you are, whose you are.

Let some of those moments in your story come to the surface in your consciousness this morning.

Where are the golden threads of God's providence recognizable in your life? Where are they easy to see for you? Where have they taken more work for you to receive, to honor?

Noticing the providential threads in your life, truly taking them in, is not about looking for proof that God exists or signs that God is in control. But those are often

the questions that distract us from seeing God’s intricate and unique power at work in our lives.

In every moment of our lives, God is there, God is here—loving us, feeling with us, inviting us, knowing us with a unique power to generate healing and life-giving transformation.

Providence is not about God being a puppeteer. Providence is our word for God’s mysterious and unrivaled potency to be present in our lives with healing opportunities, with peace that passes understanding, and with wisdom that goes far deeper than anything we call knowledge.

Font and Table are touchstones along the way for us that amplify the providential quality of our existence. We are not free agents; we are enmeshed and interdependent creatures.

And font and Table remind us that we are caught up in communities who practice having the eyes to see God’s hand in our lives, the ears to hear God’s voice, God’s call, and most of all we practice having the hearts to follow God’s lead into both the pain and promise of human life.

4 "I was there to hear your born-ing cry; I'll be there when you are old.

I re-joiced the day you were bap-tized to see your life un - fold."

We know almost nothing about Jesus’ teenage years. One glimpse of a precocious teenager speaking out in the synagogue in only the Gospel of Luke is the extent of what the Biblical canon gives us.

And so Matthew brings us to a moment that seems so far from the manger—so far from that starry night and those captivated strangers that found their way to witness a miracle, so far from a little baby just born.

Matthew’s Gospel unveils a moment of clarity about Jesus the adult—a somewhat confounding ingathering of revelation, consecration, and maturation.

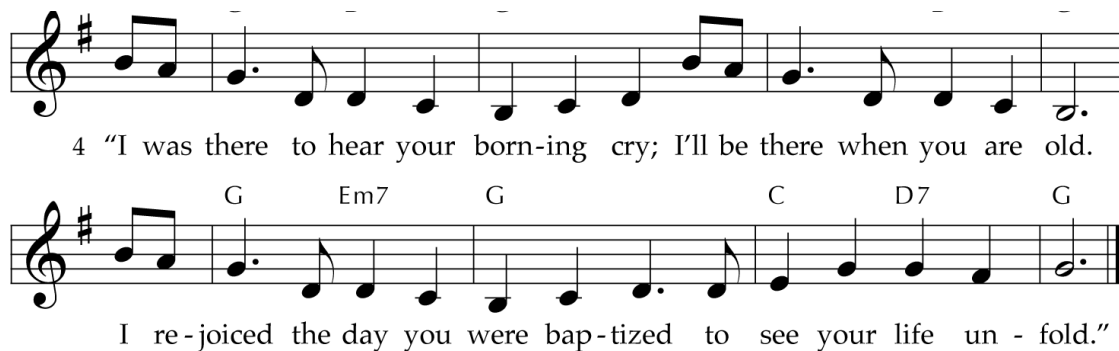
Jesus arrives on the scene sure of himself and what needs to happen—he needs to be baptized by John the Baptist. The theological curiosity of this moment has confounded scholars and believers with all sorts of technical questions for centuries: If John’s baptism is about repentance from sin why would Jesus need to be baptized? If this is about fulfillment of scripture, then why is there no scripture that says the Messiah needs to be baptized? What is the source of Jesus’ clarity about God wanting him to do this?

A few hundred years after Jesus’ human life, as political power gets tangled up with theological turf battles, something of the power of this baptismal moment gets lost.

Jesus’ sinlessness became a bone of contention. The first Council of Nicea in the 4th Century (one substance) and the Council of Chalcedon in the 5th century (fully human, fully God) diverted theological attention in another direction. And in the ensuing effort to raise the stakes for the necessity of participation in the sacramental system of the Roman church, we lost something of the poignancy of what Jesus’ baptism tells us about him.

The story tells us of Jesus’ desire and willingness to participate in the full range of human experience.

He comes along side us. He wants to be with us—to understand us, to truly know us to our core. This moment is about Jesus’ solidarity with us, it is about God’s inviolable intention to truly be here, then, now, always.



4 "I was there to hear your born-ing cry; I'll be there when you are old.

I re-joiced the day you were bap-tized to see your life un - fold."

The song of the servant in Isaiah emerges from rubble, from the ruins of a people, of a nation, of a life.

God calls the servant to work for justice over the whole wide earth.

And God’s promises, God’s fidelity, God’s unique power to transform are amplified in this Servant Song.

God gives the people breath.

God opens eyes.

God frees prisoners.

God goes with humanity into trouble, into unknown, into bold refusal to abide in injustice.

God takes the Servant by the hand.

(At the Communion Table) And brings us to these moments in time:

- where we remember who we are,
- where we remember to be grateful,
- where we remember to trust our lives,
- to tell our stories, providential threads and all.
- Where we remember we are here on this earth with God-instilled purpose.

This is the joyful feast of the people of God. A Table where we remember God's intricate mercies and God's steady love.

This Table is a part of your story, our story—a place where we are not afraid to see God's hand in our lives, a place where we are not afraid to say and show who we really are, and who God is calling us to be.

Every time we come to this Table, we embody the promise and the providential truth of baptism. Today as you come to share bread and cup, if you would like, you can take a moment to pause at the font and remember who you are and be grateful for the story that invites us here again and again.

HYMN 488