

# You Are God's Blessing

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*Baptism of the Lord (A)*  
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*Text: Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17*

Mark Twain once said, "The clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society."<sup>1</sup> That's hard to argue with, I guess, but it is true that we can tell a lot about people by the way they dress. Not everything; we can't make reliable judgments about someone's character or experience based only on their clothing. But looking at how someone is dressed can often tell you something about who they are: the man wearing coveralls with his name stitched onto the breast, the woman with the Prada bag and the Gucci boots, a group of two or three young adults in military uniform at the mall. Look at their clothes, and you've learned something about them: what they do, how they carry themselves, how they want to be seen.

That's why parents tell so many stories about their teenagers infuriating them with outrageous outfits. The specifics change from one generation to the next. Yesteryear's adults worried about miniskirts, and their successors worry about sagging pants. You can go back a thousand years and find grown-ups complaining about how the world is going to come to an end because of how the kids these days are dressing. But what doesn't change is the desire of young people to experiment. How will people see me, these kids wonder, if I dress like this? Will I feel different? Will I feel more or less like *me*? The way we dress affects not just the way others see us, but the way we see and feel about *ourselves*.

Today is the Sunday in the Christian calendar set aside for remembering the baptism of Jesus. John's baptism is something done for the purpose of repentance—it's an act that people undergo to express sorrow for what they've allowed themselves to become. But it's also a baptism that includes something more. The apostle Paul refers to it in his letter to the Galatians, as getting dressed in a new outfit, a uniform. He writes, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). As we remember Jesus' baptism and our own today, I'd like to invite us to think about what it means to be clothed with Christ, to wear this identity as though it were an outfit.

We should be clear that the baptism John practiced, the one Jesus received, is a little different from our own. It wasn't putting on Christ. It was, John tells us, "water for repentance." It was a public declaration. If you were baptized by John, it said something about what you believed about God and God's plan for the world. It said something about what you intended to do. John called people to come out and hear him in the wilderness. It was no accident that John preached here, in the wilderness, where the Hebrew people had wandered for forty years before God brought them into the promised land. John preached that God's people needed to start over, to make a fresh beginning, because God was about to come down from heaven and turn the world upside down. He brought the people out into the wilderness, and then, as they confessed their sins and promised to make a fresh start, he led them through the waters

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1 *More Maxims of Mark*. Ed. Merle Johnson. Privately printed, 1927.

of the Jordan, back into the promised land. The people who were baptized, John hoped, were changed by this experience. They would carry it with them, like a fresh outfit of clothes.

Jesus was baptized by John. You can bet your life savings on it. It's a fact that's just as certain as the fact that the street outside is called Franklin Turnpike. We can be sure of this, because it's an embarrassing story. John was a religious teacher, and he baptized his followers. There's no record of John being baptized himself. If Jesus was baptized by John, does that mean he was a follower of John. Does it make him "John lite"? What's more, when John baptized people, so the story goes, they confessed their sins. Did Jesus have sins to confess? This story raises so many questions, and yet the gospel writers tell it anyway. That's why I'm absolutely certain that it happened, that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John. It's not the kind of thing anyone would have any reason to make up, so it must be true!

So what was Jesus doing? If baptism is like a fresh outfit that you put on, Jesus was there to custom tailor it, to give it a distinctive shape that fit God's purpose. If baptism symbolizes a fresh start with God, Jesus shows us exactly what this fresh start looks like. It's Jesus statement of what he believes about God and God's plan for the world. It's his statement of what he intends to do about it. It's the outfit he puts on as he begins his ministry, and it's an outfit he shares with us, an outfit that can change the way we feel about ourselves, the way we see God, and the way we act.

Something changes when Jesus is baptized. When he enters the water, the Spirit comes down onto him in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." You can't help but hear echoes of our lesson from Isaiah in the gospel reading. Isaiah, speaking in God's voice, says, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him." The servant is a big figure in Isaiah's prophecies. The new outfit Jesus is putting on when he gets baptized is Isaiah's servant.

The servant's story begins with God's approval, acceptance, and love. That's so important. It's the most important thing about this story. If you don't remember anything else from this morning, I want you to remember this: before the servant does anything, God says, "My soul delights in you." Before Jesus teaches, before he heals, before he gives his life, God says, "You are my beloved, and I am pleased with you." Before we offer God anything, before we become good or faithful, in the depths of our sin and brokenness, God speaks to us: "You are my child, and my soul delights in you." That's the first, and the most important meaning of baptism—Jesus' baptism and yours. God loves you, God chooses you, God *delights* in you, not because of anything you did to deserve it, but just because. That's how the story begins—with God's love and delight. That's the outfit that Jesus puts on. That's what we put on.

And it's how he begins to change our world, to turn it upside down. For so many years now, it seems like our world rewards the angriest and most strident voices with all the attention. And so we believe that this is what it takes to bring change. In order to get people's attention, in order to draw credibility for your point of view, you've got to be loud and aggressive. But Isaiah says exactly the opposite about God's servant: "He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street." The servant doesn't show up on cable news with talking points. He doesn't unleash snappy verbal attacks on social media. The way of Jesus is not about speaking the loudest or the most aggressively. In fact, the way of the servant, the way of Jesus, is a way of gentleness and nonviolence: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." In other words, the servant is patient and tender with those who are wounded. And yet, Isaiah says, one-two-three times, that the servant will bring justice,

that he will change the world for the better, that he will make it look more like what God intended. That's Jesus' identity. That's the garment he puts on, and the one he invites us to put on too.

Are we ready to make this identity our own? Are we willing to reward those who quietly and gently do justice? Are we able to model these practices in our daily living, to suffuse the language of our culture with such gentleness that the bruised reeds of the weak and vulnerable in body and mind aren't broken? Are we willing to follow Jesus in carrying burdens that don't belong to us?

Your voice doesn't have to be overpowering, and you don't need physical strength, to make the kind of difference God is looking for. All you need is to remember that you belong to Christ. Isaiah shows us what can happen when we take up the call, when we put on the outfit of our baptism:

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

God chooses, God loves, God delights in the servant, in Jesus, in us. But this is not an outfit that can just stay in the closet. The servant makes those who are blind see, and frees those who are in prison. It started with Jesus. Now it's our turn. Amen.