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Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

GOD'S SERVANT

Among many times that I feel greatly blessed occupationally is when there is a deeply personal and holy moment that I as a pastor get to share. I am among those who have the high honor of seeing up close the expressions of joy and a bit of anxiety as parents look at their infant child who is about to be baptized. We pastors get to see the expression on the child's face change as water is placed on his or her head. We, ministers of the word and sacraments, hold dear in our hearts such close proximity to these highly-significant personal moments in people's lives. In a baptism we get to be a part of communicating with word and water that there is a God who not only knows the name of all who are baptized, but who joins that name with the name of God.

Back in 1976, the United States bicentennial year, a writer searched for someone who was alive at that time who was old enough that when they were a child, they would remember someone who was alive near the founding of the nation, a living link to some of the beginning events of our country. The writer found a Kentucky farmer named Burnham Ledford, who was over 100 years old in 1976. He remembered when he was a little boy being taken by a wagon to see his great-great grandmother who was then over 100 herself and who was a little girl when George Washington was inaugurated as the first President of the United States.

When Burnham was asked what he recalled, he said he remembered being taken into his great-great grandmother's house. She was feeble. She was blind. She was sitting in an old chair in the corner of a dark bedroom. "We brought Burnham to see you," his father said. The old woman turned toward the sound and reached out with long bony fingers and said in an ancient, cracking voice, "Bring him here." "They had to push me toward her," Burnham remembered. "I was afraid of her. But when I got close to her, she reached out her hands and began to stroke my face. She felt my eyes and my nose, my mouth and my chin. And all at once, she seemed to be satisfied, and she pulled me close to her and held me tight." "This boy's a

Ledford,” she said, “I can feel it. I know this boy. He’s one of us.”¹ It obviously was a deeply personal moment of identity that stuck with Burnham Ledford throughout his life.

John the Baptist got to be right there for many of these personal moments when people confessed their sins and were enabled to return God’s gracious embrace through being baptized in the Jordan River. The Gospel of Matthew doesn’t describe Jesus’ baptism in splashy detail. When he came to be baptized, we’re told that John resisted, but Jesus insisted. “It will fulfill all righteousness,” he told John. Then we are told, “just as (Jesus) 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.” That sounds like a personal and private moment in relationship to God. The gospel account continues, “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” According to Matthew, the voice did not say, “You are my Son,” as if talking only to Jesus, but “This is my Son.” This too was a very personal moment, but this expression of identity was not a private moment.

In our Presbyterian understanding of the sacrament of baptism, we do not have private baptismal services outside the presence of the congregation. Each baptismal service I have ever carried out has been very personal, but not private. That, in part, is because the congregation has an important part in the service, taking vows along with the parents or the person being baptized, to join in the spiritual journey of the one baptized as a supportive and loving presence. Our baptism finds its meaning in Jesus’ baptism. I would hope each and every baptism would be a very personal experience. Yet through our baptism, God publicly announces our identity as a citizen in a new dominion, sometimes even before we know what is happening. God gathers us in a love that precedes all human relationships and family ties. Baptism is the sign that we belong to God.

“Here is my servant,” God says through Isaiah, “my chosen, in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring justice to the nations.” As Isaiah’s prophecy reverberates in the background, we are told that Jesus is the beloved child of God, but we are also given a picture of what kind of son he will be. He is like the gentle servant of God described in Isaiah, who will not break a

bruised reed, who will not extinguish a dimly burning wick. He is also a holy messenger, commissioned to bring light and freedom and justice to the blind, the shackled, the forsaken. When a Christian is washed with the waters of baptism, Christ's mission of compassion and justice becomes our mission too. We are blessed with an identity as a beloved child of God, but we also take on the identity of being a servant of God. We go from the waters of baptism and wade into the undertow of life in the world, hoping and praying that by God's grace, as we hold on to each other, we won't get swept away before the current changes. Have you ever been in a swimming pool where a group of people joined hands and began going around in a circle? I remember doing it as a little kid. A bunch of us were trying, but having a hard time staying connected and moving forward. But then we were joined by a larger stronger person who joined the circle, who urged us to stay linked together and to keep going. With the power and the motivation of the larger one, as we kept going, the water eventually began to flow in the direction of the circle.

God as a human got baptized? What could that mean? Well, for one thing, it means that God intimately knows the trials involved in being a humble servant working for a reign that has yet to be fully realized. But perhaps more importantly, Jesus in the Jordan demonstrates that the Christ will never ask us to go somewhere that he is not willing to accompany us. Knowing that God has been washed by the waters of baptism reminds us that we're not called to take on the public challenges alone. Even closer than we pastors get to be in some of these personal, public, holy moments, God is closer still. What's more, God's presence is not limited to moments, but continues day after day, night after night, strengthening us to live out the identity and the mission we've been given, standing with us in the challenging currents of life in today's world. God is in the circle with us. So, when we see the circular baptismal font each Sunday, we know that God has been where we are, and is in the circle with us still. With that, we can hand-in-hand keep journeying with our personal and public identity as beloved children who are servants of God until such a time when the flow is no longer against us. Thank God for the waters of baptism that help us to know who and whose we are. Amen.

¹ From a sermon by Thomas G. Long, "Called by Name."