

# One Truth at a Time: Beloved Son

A sermon by Jim Somerville, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Richmond, Va.

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The Baptism of the Lord

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (NIV).

Here we are, several days into the New Year, and I’m still writing 2013 on my checks instead of 2014. Does that ever happen to you? It makes me think that if we can get confused about the calendar we use all the time, we might get even more confused about the calendar we use some of the time. So, before I get into the sermon, let’s take a moment to review the calendar of the Christian Year, and let’s do it in the form of a quiz. There are ten questions, and here’s a hint: three of the answers are the same answer, and it can be found on the front of your bulletin.[\[i\]](#) So, here we go:

1. What is the name of the season that starts four Sundays before Christmas, when we begin to wait and prepare for the coming of Christ?  
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2. This is multiple choice: the season of Christmas begins on December 25 and lasts for how many days? a. 3 b. 5 c. 12 d. 365
3. Epiphany—which means, literally, “to shine upon,” and is celebrated as

the day God’s light began to shine upon Jesus and reveal him for who he really was—always falls on January \_\_\_\_\_.

4. The Sundays after Epiphany are not really considered a season. They are part of something the Christian calendar calls \_\_\_\_\_.
5. This year Ash Wednesday falls on March 5. Ash Wednesday is the first day of the season of \_\_\_\_\_.
6. The 40 days of Lent are a good time to take a long, hard look at ourselves and see what needs to change. The last three days of the season are Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy \_\_\_\_\_.
7. On Easter Sunday we begin a celebration that lasts for a full seven weeks, sometimes called “the Great \_\_\_\_\_ Days.”
8. The birthday of the church is celebrated on the day the Holy Spirit fell on the believers in Jerusalem, a day we call \_\_\_\_\_.
9. The Sundays after Pentecost go on for nearly half a year. They, too, are part of something the Christian calendar calls “\_\_\_\_\_.”
10. When the church is full of the Spirit, there is nothing ordinary about \_\_\_\_\_!

Nicely done! Today is the First Sunday after Epiphany, also known as “The Baptism of the Lord.” But the baptism is an epiphany in its own right, isn’t it? The light shines a little brighter on Jesus, we see him a little more clearly for who he really is—or maybe I should say a lot more clearly, because if last week we learned that Jesus was from the very beginning a king, this week we learn that he was also the beloved Son of God. I love the story of Jesus’ baptism. Each of the Gospel writers tells it. But it’s only Matthew who takes up the question that must have been on everybody’s mind in those days: “Why does the sinless son of God submit to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins?” I’ve asked myself that question, and this time through I decided to enter into the story as fully as possible, to see if I could find among its details some hidden clue.

It begins when Jesus is about thirty years old, probably living in Nazareth,

presumably the son of Joseph and Mary, apparently still living at home and working at his father's trade as a carpenter. I picture him in that carpenter's shop, with the smell of sweat and sawdust in the air, when someone comes to town who has been baptized by John in the Jordan. "Something big's getting ready to happen," he would say. "John is down there baptizing people, washing away their sins, getting them cleaned up and ready for the one who is to come!" "Well, who is it?" they would want to know. "John didn't say," he would answer. "He just said that someone more powerful than he was coming, someone whose sandals he wasn't worthy to carry. He said the ax was already lying at the root of the tree, and any tree that didn't bear good fruit would be cut down and thrown on the fire. He said the one who was coming had his winnowing fork in his hand, and he would separate the wheat from the chaff, gather the wheat into his granary, but burn the chaff with unquenchable fire." And then everybody would want to know who it was, and some of them would make up their minds to go, and it may have been that Jesus went with them.

But this was no small decision. That place where John was baptizing was some 70 miles away from Nazareth on foot, and these people would have definitely been on foot. They would have had to get some supplies together, throw some food in a bag, lace up their sandals and start down the road toward Jericho. But can you imagine? If all of them were wondering who the one to come might be, and Jesus was right there walking along with them? It would be like that time he walked to Emmaus with those two disciples after he had been raised from the dead. They didn't know it was him, and they kept talking about him in the third person, but he knew all along. I picture it like that—Jesus and a few others walking down the road toward Jericho, talking about all the things people might have talked about under those circumstances—but I don't picture Jesus saying much of anything, mostly just listening with an ironic smile on his face until one of them asked him: "What are you smiling about?" "Oh, nothing," he would say. "It's nothing." And when they finally got there they would find all those people standing in line, waiting to be baptized, and—knowing Jesus—he probably just got in line with the rest of them.

So, imagine John the Baptist, standing out there waist-deep in the water, asking one person after another to confess their sins. When they did he would say, “Are you truly sorry for your sins? Do you repent and promise to sin no more?” And when they nodded yes he would dip them down under the water, and they would come up dripping wet, and clean—their sins washed away. One after another they came, and he baptized them until his arms got tired, but then he looked up and saw Jesus standing there, and his heart skipped a beat.

He recognized him at once.

If we can trust Luke’s version of the story it was John who first recognized him as the Messiah, even before he was born. Do you remember? When Mary heard that she was going to have a baby she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, and she called out at the front gate, and Elizabeth said, “Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” That was John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin! They may have seen each other several times a year at festivals and family reunions. But now here they were standing face to face in the river.

“I should be baptized by you,” John said. “Why do you come to me?” It was a good question. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and he couldn’t imagine that the sinless Son of God needed to be baptized. He tried to prevent him, Matthew says, and if he’d gotten his way Jesus might never have been baptized. But John didn’t get his way. Jesus got his. He said, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness,” and John consented. But what did Jesus mean, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness?” It’s hard to say. The King James Version reads, “Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.” The Message, Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, reads, “Do it. God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.” The literal translation from the Greek reads: “Let at present thus for behooving it is to us to fill every justice.” That doesn’t make it any clearer. But you get the gist of it, don’t you? Jesus is saying, “Just do it, John. I can’t explain it right now,

but this is the right thing to do.” So John did it, and it turns out it was the right thing to do, because as soon as Jesus came up out of the water the sky opened up, and the Holy Spirit fluttered down, and a voice from heaven said, “This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

When I read those words this time around I thought, “What man wouldn’t love that, to hear his father say in front of a crowd of people: “This is my son. I not only claim him, I love him. I not only love him, I’m proud of him”? Too few earthly fathers are able to do that. I don’t know why. We seem to have trouble talking about our feelings. Maybe our fathers never said it to us. But Jesus’ father said it to him, and he said it out loud, so that everybody could hear it. Can you imagine what that did for him? How it must have made him invincible? What could any mortal do to him after that? His heavenly father loved him, and was proud of him! Imagine what it would do to us to hear those same words every time we threw back the covers and climbed out of bed in the morning. “You are my child, whom I love! In you I am well pleased!”

Honestly, could anything stop us?

When I try to explain why Jesus was baptized I often say that he waded out into a river that was still muddy with human sin, and allowed himself to be dipped down under its waters. I believe that he was identifying himself with us, taking our sin upon himself, and I think when he did it his father said, “That’s my boy! That’s exactly the kind of thing I would do!” But this time, when I read this passage, I wondered: if our sins were transferred onto him, is there any chance his blessing was transferred onto us? That doesn’t really seem like a fair exchange, does it? “Here,” Jesus says, “I’ll take your sin, and you take my blessing.” But there are verses in the Bible that would suggest Jesus came for just this purpose: to show us how much God loves us. That somehow, in his life and death and resurrection God was saying, “You—all of you—are my beloved children, and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, even this.” I’m not sure you could say that he was “well pleased” with all of us. I know there have been plenty of times when I’ve done things that haven’t pleased him. But in some sense this whole story, including the

story of Jesus' baptism, is God's way of saying that he loves us, and that there's nothing he wouldn't do for us.

And I guess I know something about that.

In my collection of old VHS tapes there is one labeled "Catherine's Baptism." Yesterday I got it out and plugged it into my ancient VCR, and after fast-forwarding through most of a Sunday morning worship service I got to the place where I was standing there in the baptistery, inviting Catherine to come and join me. She was so little! Eight-and-a-half years old, her head barely visible above the edge of the baptistery. I talked about how much she wanted to be baptized, and how she had been begging me for over a year. I said, "Usually, I ask children to wait until they are ten, eleven, even twelve years old, but I couldn't hold this child back. I finally relented, believing that you shouldn't discourage this kind of enthusiasm. And so, Catherine," I said, "will you profess your faith?" And she said it, in a voice loud enough to be heard in the back of the room where someone had set up a camcorder on a tripod, "Jesus is Lord!" And then I raised my right hand over her head and said what I always say at baptisms: "In obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, and upon your profession of faith in him, I baptize you into the family of God in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." And then I dipped her down under the water, and because she was so little her feet came off the floor, and there she was—stretched out full length in the water—her feet like pale fish swimming just below the surface. For a moment she just floated there, suspended by the grace of God. And then I pulled her up, and she found her footing, and took the first breath of her new life in Christ.

I didn't say anything in that moment. I was so choked with emotion I don't think I could have. But I could understand why God said what he did at Jesus' baptism: this was my beloved daughter, in whom I was well pleased; I couldn't have been prouder. As for the rest of us, when we respond to the love of God, when we receive the gift of his grace, when we enter the waters of baptism, I can imagine that he feels it all over again, that something inside him leaps up and says, "You, too, are my child! I love you, and I'm proud of you!"

Honestly, could anything stop us after that?

[i] The Sundays after Epiphany, beginning with the Baptism of the Lord and ending with Transfiguration, do not in themselves constitute a special season. They are ordinary time, if you will. However, the Scripture readings continue to shine with the radiance of Christmas-Epiphany, with the dazzling revelation of God in Christ Jesus (from *The New Handbook of the Christian Year*).