

Today is the Baptism of Christ Sunday, which is why we heard the story of Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River.

I want to tell you a more contemporary story about a baptism experience that the Rev. Karoline Lewis had.

*She writes, "When I was pastor of a church outside of Atlanta, I ended up writing a dialogue sermon for Baptism of Our Lord Sunday because the church I served was a unique denominational blend, and yet was a Lutheran church.*

*The dialogue sermon quoted and paraphrased much of Luther's Small Catechism so that my congregation would know that baptism is God's claim of "you."*

*Many years later, I "preached" this same sermon with my husband in south Minneapolis, full-blown Lutheran country.*

*After the service, a longtime member of the church, 90-year-old Dott, came up to me and said, "Karoline, is that really true?"*

*"What?" I responded. "That GOD baptizes you?" "Well, yes. This is what we believe, Dott."*

*She then told me why she doubted the "you."*

*Dott had a sister, born too early and not expected to live, about three years before Dott was even born.*

*The only option was to bring her home for her two-to-three month lifespan.*

*During that time, the grandmother baptized her.*

*Then, when Dott's sister died, of course her parents set up a meeting with the pastor for the funeral.*

*The pastor told them that he would do the funeral, but not in the sanctuary because he had not baptized the baby.*

*The funeral was held in the basement of the church.*

*Dott then said to me, "Do you mean my sister is okay?"*

*The sister she never met.*

*The sister she had mourned for her entire 90 years.*

*The sister for whom she wondered, "is God really for her?"*

*Oh, yes. I said. The "you" your sister heard, God meant.*

*And God did not, and will never, let her go.*

After Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River, a voice came down from heaven and said, *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* I say this to every child.

Then I say, "You, too are God's beloved, with whom God is well pleased."

Baptism is done to remind each of us, and our families, that we are God's beloved children, and as babies, we should be raised as such.

Baptism reminds us of what God already knows.

It doesn't change God's mind about us.

I often say that the purpose of prayer isn't to change others or to change God, it's to change the person who is praying.

Well, the purpose of baptism isn't to change God, but to change us, to soften our hearts towards the newly baptized person.

It also reminds us of our responsibility to help raise that child in the Christian faith.

I also want to quickly add that I don't think that baptism is like fire insurance.

It's not our 'get into heaven free' card should something happen to us.

And one more thing, unlike what that pastor told poor Dot in the story I told you, it does not matter who baptizes you.

All that must be present for baptism is water and the Holy Spirit.

It is a joy and a privilege for me to be able to baptize the children of our church, but any of you could perform a baptism should you be so asked.

In fact, the story that we hear about John the Baptizer baptizing Jesus may or may not be true.

In today's story, John is shut up in prison when Jesus is baptized.

At that time, people were getting baptized in droves and they were baptizing each other, so it wouldn't have been unusual for someone unknown to us to have baptized Jesus.

What's important about baptism is not who does it, but who receives it, and the impact it has on them and the lives of their family members.

It's powerful to be reminded that you are a beloved child of God, that is who you are.

Your identity.

We're in an era when many of the things that used to define us are changing.

We change jobs and careers with frequency.

We move around more rather than staying in a single community.

Our families are separating more.

Not to mention technology and all the pressures that puts on us,

It is easy to forget who we are, at our core.

Baptism reminds us that we discover *who* we are in relation to *whose* we are, God's beloved children.

We belong to God's family, and baptism is a tangible sign of that.

When we get lost in the shuffle, feel like we are drowning in the to-do list, wondering why we are running so fast on the hamster wheel, baptism reminds us of our purpose.

Our first purpose.

This is what I imagine it did for Jesus as well.

After all, his baptism is the start of his ministry.

I think that he also struggled with his knowledge of self, that he had questions, even doubts, about what he was supposed to be and do.

And I like to think he found some clarity when he stood in line with other people, and knelt in the Jordan River, and then the signs of the dove and the voice descended.

I like to think that, because it is the way most of us realize some sense of purpose—not in one moment of striking revelation, but in a growing, sometimes faltering, understanding of a bit of direction.

A direction that comes about from signs and words of encouragement from loved ones.

And sometimes that sign is simply our gut feeling that says, “This way seems right,” and so we take one step.

Purpose doesn’t have to be a huge, life-altering decision.

I think it’s smaller, more intimate than that.

It’s something we strive for daily.

It’s every time we wake up, us asking ourselves, “*What is God’s pull on me today? What will I do today to make a difference?*”

We have this purpose because of our baptism, because of the water that poured over us that told us that we are blessed as beloved children of God, and therefore we have the responsibility of living out God's purpose of our lives.

Athanasius, one of the early church theologians says that Jesus became one of us (even became baptized like us) so that we might become more like him.

And how do we become more like Jesus?

By being in tune with both the world around us and how God is calling us to live in it.

Illustrator Emily McDowell wrote,

*"Finding yourself is not really how it works.*

*You aren't a ten-dollar bill in last winter's coat pocket.*

*You are also not lost.*

*Your true self is right there, buried under cultural conditioning, other people's opinions, and inaccurate conclusions you drew as a kid that became your beliefs about who you are.*

*Finding yourself is actually returning to yourself...*

*An unlearning, an excavation, a remembering of who you were before the world got its hands on you."*

Or, in other words, finding yourself is returning to God's purpose for you at this moment in your life.

I love the fact that water is used for baptism, because it's so ubiquitous.

And because of its ubiquity, it's open to all.

No special tools or supplies needed, just some water.

It also means that it's really easy for us to be prompted to remember our baptisms because we interact with water all the time.

The founders of the Protestant Reformation insisted that every time we wash with water, it's an opportunity for us to remember our baptism and the promises made to us through it.

Baptism, while only conducted once, was not intended to be a once-and-done event, but rather something we remember regularly.

I confess I don't do this.

I often go for long periods of time without thinking about my baptism.

But I am committed to trying the practice of telling myself, "You are God's beloved," each time I interact with water.

Whether brushing my teeth or washing my hands or doing the dishes or taking a shower or running my hand under the water while the washing machine is filling up or when I am filling my dog's water bowl.

I will quietly whisper to myself, "You are God's beloved."

I will do this because I hope that it will pull me back into the purpose God has for me, at that moment.

I also hope it will connect me to the people who made baptismal promises on my behalf, how grateful I am to them and the communities that have formed me, and how I can live into that gratitude by living out God's purpose for my life.

I know that's a lot to think about each time we wash our hands, but I do hope you will think about your baptism each time you interact with water.

If you don't know anything about your baptism, perhaps you could ask loved ones what they know.

Whether or not you were baptized, remember, baptism reminds us of something that we already know, that each of us is beloved.

I hope to take this to heart and take the responsibility seriously to try to live into God's purpose for you at this moment in time.

Amen.