

Baptism of Our Lord 2021

Now that's an experience I suspect few of us have had. Heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice is heard, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Many of us have been waiting for a long time to hear some voice from heaven tell us who we are, and announce that we are beloved.

I grew up being shaped by hymns and prayers which were filled with language about a God who is "up there," who rules from the heavens above, a God who is often pictured as grand, a loving, but terrifying figure. God was always somewhere other than here, as in "Our Father who art in heaven."

For most of my childhood, I thought God looked like the Archbishop of Finland—old, gray, remote, but kind.

Of course I knew intellectually that God didn't look like him, but I had to have a picture, and this was about the best I could do.

In a book called *The God We Never Knew*, Marcus Borg talks about the images of God that shaped his early life. For him, the prevailing picture, coming from his Lutheran background, was of a remote, often judgmental God. He had come to believe, he says, in God "the finger-shaker," full of requirements for good behaviour.

Eventually that God stopped making sense to Borg—as my "old man" images did for me. I read a book by an English bishop named John Robinson called *Honest to God*, in which he talks about the "end of theism," which for him meant an end to seeing God as an object who is up there and out there.

He was naming my questions. It all made sense. God isn't really up there, and he offered a new "location" of God as "in our midst."

The problem was, that I couldn't understand this new alternative and I was at loss to find what a new sense of God would be like.

That led to a journey that is lifelong. You see, every image of God is only partial, whether it is God as King, Ruler, Father, Rock, Lawgiver, Judge, Spirit, or whether it is one that speaks of God as Mother, or Light, or Lady Wisdom, or Lover.

I have become convinced that the heavens do part, that voices do come from heaven. But heaven is not up there somewhere but in the midst of life here, and the voices that speaks may not use words. But in some way we are "spoken to", and we can, in some way "hear" and be called by God.

Jesus' experience at the River Jordan was his breakthrough experience with God, a life-claiming sense of being blessed, beloved, and called. "You are my Son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Many of us spend a good deal of our lives searching for a sense of belovedness. We search for a blessing, for a word to be spoken to us—by parents, by friends and colleagues, by God—that says, “I see the goodness in you and will do everything I can to bring it out in you.” Much of the drivenness many of us struggle with comes from an inadequate sense of having been blessed early on, and so we spend our lives trying to earn that blessing for ourselves.

All human loving and blessing is imperfect, and so we long for the sense that there is a Perfect Love that holds and blesses us.

That is what Jesus experienced at the Jordan River—an intense awareness of being delighted in, loved and at peace at once. There are countless records of ordinary people having such intense experiences of blessing down through the centuries.

Listen to this poem by William Butler Yeats. He describes a moment when this happened for him.

You can imagine it as something like experiencing God at Tim Horton’s:

*“My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary one,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.*

*While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.”*

From beyond himself Yeats felt blessed and beloved. But it was something happening in the here and now.

Blaise Pascal, the 17th century mathematician, carried around a piece of paper sewn into his coat that described one night when he experienced what he called “fire”—the overwhelming presence of God.

Most of us, I imagine, have never had an experience like those, but my guess is that we have all experienced what we might call daily blessedness.

It’s what happens when the sun comes up and through the window in the morning and you sense that it is more than just light; or when you hit the breaking point and the phone rings with someone just checking in on you, and you sense your belovedness again; or you sit down

to dinner with someone you care about, and you know you are blessed just to be who we are and to be alive here.

You are surrounded by blessedness. You are beloved. The voice that spoke to Jesus saying “You are my beloved” speaks to you in that same word.

It takes time to learn to hear and trust that voice. It’s natural to think that if you ever actually had an experience of God like the one Jesus had, it would all be easier. But that gets it backward. For Jesus, living the faith came first. That’s what brought him to the Jordan River. And the moment could happen when he knew God’s love.

The secret is to do the faith things. Take up the practices that for centuries have brought people closer to God. Find some time in your day to be still, read your way through the gospels a few verses at a time, ask for God to go with you through your day. Find a small group to learn with, a way of serving people who are struggling, find ways to be generous with your time and your resources. Conduct the experiment called faith, take the steps faith calls for, and see what happens.

God always calls people into life together, into being a beloved community with each other. That was Jesus’ experience in the Jordan. He saw God in every face he encountered. He belonged to them and they to him, because they all belonged to God.

St. Philip’s is learning how to take our place as members of the human race who have an immense amount to receive from our fellow human beings in Etobicoke. We are joining hands with our community partners again this winter in caring for our neighbours who don’t have enough.

Our congregation can’t simply make its solo contribution. Like Jesus, we have to go down into the water with everyone else, and there it is that we will hear the voice from heaven.

I am convinced that Jesus’ baptism is also our baptism. He wasn’t sent simply to offer a brilliant Spirit-filled performance. In fact, he promised his followers that the Spirit that was in him would be theirs too.

The promise for us is that if we will follow him, learn from him, and stay with him, we too will hear a voice from heaven saying, “You, you are my son, my daughter, my beloved; in you I am well pleased.”