

“Down by the Riverside”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 3:1-17
January 13, 2019
Baptism of the Lord

“Behold God, beholding you...and smiling.” So wrote Tony de Mello, a Jesuit priest from India.

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Camel hair clothes and a leather belt and bugs and honey for lunch.

Matthew’s Gospel gives us the birth of Jesus and the visit of the magi and the flight to Egypt. And the next thing we know, we’re down by the riverside, out in the wilderness with this very Old Testament prophet. John the Baptist is a cranky ranter, like Jeremiah and Amos and all the others. It sounds like the cousin of our Lord has gone a bit feral out there in the dessert. But his message of repentance draws a crowd looking for renewal in the river. And it’s not just any river. It’s the Jordan, the river that reminds the people of freedom and that this land was promised to them. And so, people come seeking something from him.

And he does not disappoint, with a top-notch takedown of the Pharisees and Sadducees who show up. They can’t rely on their lineage to save them. There is apocalyptic judgment in his words of unquenchable fire. But there is also a promise: God is bigger than a birthright, and those who bear fruit will be gathered in, so expand your mind and turn toward God!

The people who came seeking something got quite a show. And they got a promise. And they got pointed toward the one who is more powerful and who will baptize with the Spirit and fire.

Jesus comes to the riverside, seeking something from John. He desires to be baptized.

We hear the early church wrestling with itself and seeking to be crystal clear about John’s relationship to Jesus: John can’t imagine baptizing Jesus. John’s been telling the crowd that he’s not worthy to tie the guy’s shoes, and now he’s being asked to baptize him! But it is part of what God wants here, a fulfillment of what Jesus came to do. Jesus steps into the Jordan — entering the cleansing waters that John has been offering. These are the waters of repentance and promise, where the only lineage that matters is the one connecting you to the source of all life.

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My great aunt Betty had a plan. She knew her niece was going to be visiting California and getting to meet Betty’s new granddaughter. Betty was too frail to travel that far, so she asked her niece to do what must be done. She needed to get hold of that beautiful baby and sneak her off to the bathroom — or maybe the kitchen sink would work, but she’d have to be more of a ninja to pull that off — and she needed to quickly and quietly baptize the child. Her niece chose not to accept the mission.

You might guess that Aunt Betty was Catholic, and you’d be correct, but this kind of misunderstanding of baptism is rampant in Protestant circles as well. *We have to baptize the baby.* It’s the magical act that ensures salvation. How else will that baby’s sins — past, present, and future and the ones it inherits — be forgiven?

Of course baptism is about forgiveness. But not as some immunization against the forces of evil or antibiotic against wayward behavior or circuit breaker to allow the grace of God to flow. We don't go down to the water to make sure that the forgiveness contract is notarized. The forgiveness — and all the other gifts of God — are already signed, sealed, and delivered. Baptism is sacred, not magical. It is ancient and holy and brings us to a thinner place, where the air is lighter and the light is warmer and a melody older than time catches our ear.

Baptism is also about relationship — between God and the baptized and between the baptized and all those who love them. And baptism is about receiving an identity: child of God, claimed as God's own. And baptism is about conferring a name: beloved. It is about shedding the names and identities we try to stick on each other and ourselves — unlovable, awkward, failure, ugly, stupid, weak, boring, defective — stripping those off on the beach and wading in the water. Baptism is about joining Christ in the river, because he entered it with us. We go to the water and every single time we wonder what we'll find there.

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Father Greg Boyle is a Jesuit Priest who has been working on some of the toughest streets of Los Angeles since the mid 1980s. What started out as a willingness to simply talk to and get to know the gang members in the neighborhood of his congregation soon became a bakery where kids could learn work skills. That eventually turned into a wildly successful enterprise called Homeboy Industries which offers mental health counseling, legal services, tattoo removal, curriculum and education classes, work-readiness training, and employment services. Father Greg, known as "G" in *el barrio*, speaks fluent Spanish, takes no baloney, spreads love lavishly, and is deeply respected in the community.

Father Greg tells the story of Cesar, whom he'd known since Cesar was a scared little kid during the 1987 earthquake. Now Cesar was a young man who'd just completed a four-year prison stint. He called Father Greg: "I just got out and don't really have a place to stay...I don't got no clothes...my lady she left me and she burned all my clothes! Can you help me?" Father Greg agrees to pick him up that afternoon.

Cesar is a big, menacing-looking dude anyway, and now he's all pumped up from prison, where he'd been spending time in the weight room, filling the sleeves. But when he sees the priest, he jumps up and claps his hands and does a little jig on the sidewalk. "When I saw you right now, G, I got all happy!" he exclaims, hugging Father Greg.

They head to JC Penney and Father Greg tells Cesar he's got \$200 to spend. He quickly gets the basics he'll need to hunt for a job, and then the two of them stand together in a long checkout line. Everyone in the vicinity is staring at Cesar, with his rippling muscles and too-loud voice — all looking and trying to look like they're not looking. Cesar notices, and asks, loudly, "[Dang] G, do I look *that* scary?"

And Father Greg replies, "Yeah, pretty much, dog." Everyone in line breaks into laughter.

That night Father Greg's phone rings at 3 a.m. Cesar asks, "Did I wake you?"

"I gotta ask you a question," he says. "You know how I've always seen you as my father, ever since I was a little kid? Well, I have to ask you a question." His voice started to break.

"Have I . . . been . . . your son?"

"Oh, [heck] yeah." the priest replies.

And crying gently, Cesar says, "Then ... I will be . . . your son. And you. . . will be my father. And nothing will separate us, right?"

"That's right."

Greg Boyle reflects: "In this early morning call Cesar did not discover that he has a father. He discovered that he is a son worth having. The voice broke through the clouds of his terror and the crippling mess of his own history, and he felt himself beloved. "

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"... just as he 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. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

What we find in the water is that we are God's and we are beloved and the lineage we choose is what will save us. So we don't go down to the riverside alone. When we bring little Levi to the waters, his parents will be there. And his family. And you, the family that his parents have chosen for him. And every single one of us will make a promise to walk with him. Those promises were made for us too, and so we'll remember our baptisms — past, present, and future — during our closing hymn.

You are beloved. You are children of God. Just as you are. It begins at the water, and we return there often. And you are called to take that identity and that name with you wherever you go, that you might bear fruit in this world that tastes of *belovedness*.

You. Yes, you. You, with all the stuff you've got piled on the beach. You, with the fear and the debt and the doubt and the questions you're afraid to ask and the crankiness and the cynicism and the complete exhaustion. You are beloved.

Behold God, beholding you...and smiling. Amen.