

## Ordinary, Beloved and Anointed

**Matthew 3:11-17 (The Message):** *(John the Baptist said,) "I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama—compared to him I'm a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned."*

*Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him. John objected, "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not YOU!" But Jesus insisted. "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." So, John did it. The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life."*

In a few weeks our country will inaugurate a new president. This transfer typically happens peacefully in our nation and with much pomp and glitter and glory. There will be a swearing-in ceremony. The chief justice of the Supreme Court, dressed in his justice robes, will invite the president-elect to place his hand on the Bible and take the oath of office. Leaders from around the nation and the world will be present to watch. Millions of pictures will be taken.

People have obtained special tickets and are buying special tuxedos and dresses to attend the inauguration events. There will be balls and dances with music that will make skirts twirl and toes tap and hearts soar. The new first lady will wear a designer dress, have the best manicure ever and will astonish our eyes. The money we will spend on security would blow our minds if

we knew the numbers, and the finest foods from around the country will be served. This is a big deal, and our nation always inaugurates our new president with style.

In our passage in Matthew for today, we read what we could call Jesus' inauguration into his ministry. This is the beginning of Jesus' ministry and is the "ceremony" by which the beginning of his ministry is marked. But the inauguration of the Savior of the world to his ministry surely has a very different kind of feel than the inauguration of the leader of a major nation in our world, doesn't it?

### **More than Ordinary Spiritual Cleaning**

Let's take a closer look at how Matthew describes it for us. To start, we find John the Baptist is baptizing people down at the River Jordan. It was not uncommon in that day for Jewish people to go to rivers and other places for spiritual cleaning. Before they went to temple or after working or even after being with non-Jewish people, it was common for men and women to do some kind of ritual cleaning.

So this practice of ritual washing and cleaning was not something new. The practice of spiritually washing was part of their routine, part of their lives. So this act in itself was quite ordinary really.

But what John the Baptist was doing was something more than ritual cleaning. He was inviting them to something more than a momentary cleansing after they had eaten a non-kosher food or were trying to get ready for the temple. What John's baptism was inviting them to was to be a new way of life. And John tells them that this Messiah who is coming will give them not just water, but the Holy Spirit who will help clean them not just on the outside, but on the inside, too. He will change them from the inside out. And after hearing what John says, we start to get excited. John proclaims that this Messiah is a bigwig, someone who is going to do something grand and glorious and new. This will be no ordinary man.

But then Jesus shows up. And by golly, he is an ordinary man—we know he is God’s son—but he is also an ordinary man, and here he insists on being like all the other men in line waiting to be baptized. One of the crowd. When John the Baptist sees him, he recognizes Jesus immediately as this Messiah he’d been talking about and doesn’t want to baptize him. But Jesus insists on being baptized by John like everyone else. He wants John the Baptist to do this. No chief priest here in flowing robes. No religious higher-ups or even community leaders are present to watch this baptism of the Savior of the World. No, just an ordinary day, with ordinary people. And Jesus wants this man, who many thought was crazy, to do the honors.

But, as seems to happen so often in this life of seeking to follow God, something very holy happens amid this ordinariness. Jesus goes under the water, and John is aware of the sky “opening up” and the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus. It looked like a dove, the text tells us.

So the sky “opened” up. And this is not something that is ordinary. Indeed, the sky opening is extraordinary. The word in the original language here that we translate “open” is “arroyo” in the Greek, and we find this same word used in Genesis when the skies opened for the flood to come in Noah’s day. It’s the same word used in the stories of Jesus healing the blind man in Matthew 9 and John 9 and their eyes becoming “open,” or the jail cell “opening” miraculously to let Paul and Silas free in Acts 16. On this very ordinary day among these very ordinary people in a river out of town, something “opens up” in a new way.

The spiritual world opens up in a new way as this group of simple, ordinary people is hanging out in an ordinary river.

### **Holy Love Came to Nilda’s Kitchen**

Can you think of times when the spiritual world opened up smack dab in the middle of something very ordinary and very human?

Here's one of my memories from when I lived in Philadelphia. About 20 years ago, in the Frankford section of Philadelphia, a family from Puerto Rico, seeking to make a new life, showed up on my friend Nilda's doorsteps. They were supposed to be visiting family in New York City, and then to return to Puerto Rico. But for many reasons they felt they could not go back. It was Christmastime, and Nilda's already strapped family barely had enough rice to feed themselves, much less a family of six.

Nilda's oldest son, unbeknown to Nilda, grabbed the large basket from the kitchen that they used for grocery shopping and started going to all the neighbors. He told them that some relatives were moving into the area and needed some food. By the time the young man got to my house the basket was full to overflowing with rice, some fruit, spices, bread, and even some dried milk. After I contributed to the basket, my children and I followed him home to Nilda's house, where he presented the basket to Nilda and the family, and it was declared that there would be a feast for the neighborhood.

Nilda was a devout Catholic, and in her kitchen she had a small crucifix hanging. As everyone was cooking, laughing and sharing food together, Jesus was surely with us. An ordinary time, with ordinary struggling people trying to find their way. And a new sense of community "opened up." Something very holy was happening in that ordinary gathering of struggling human souls.

Isn't this the way God seems to work? Breaking holy love into the most ordinary of times.

### **A Savior for EVERY Person**

Now, back to John the Baptist and Jesus. After the opening of the sky, the Spirit came down, and a voice is heard. One wonders if everyone heard the voice, or only Jesus and John. "This is my beloved Son."

So, this is the picture of Jesus' inauguration. No headlines or Facebook Live feeds. No tweets. No huge crowds or meals. Just an almost ordinary day at a river with something very holy happening. This is how Jesus starts his formal ministry—ordinary, being called beloved and then sent out. In Matthew 4 we read that the first place he goes is into the wilderness after this "inauguration." We'll look at that another day.

Why would the Savior of the world begin his ministry in such an ordinary and obscure way? Wouldn't you think that this should be headlines on CNN or FOX or MSNBC? Wouldn't you think that the Savior of the world would at least be able to have some special dinner to mark his baptism, or surely have the witness of at least someone with some kind of power?

But this is the way of Jesus. Born into obscurity. Just a couple weeks ago we celebrated his birth in a stable to an unmarried teenager. Dirty ol' farm animals and outcast shepherds were the first to see him. Wise men with wealth and education came on the scene a little later, but they weren't even people of the Jewish faith.

Rev. Melvin Burton from Refreshing Fountain Church of God in Christ told us on Christmas Eve that Jesus was born a common man so that common men and women would know that Jesus is for them, too.

And maybe Jesus was baptized, called and anointed as a common man so that we common men and women know that he was like us and that we, too, are called, anointed and sent into the world.

Not many of us could ever imagine being inaugurated president of the United States, but we all can imagine being baptized in the river by an ordinary person, hanging out with people like us, and being amazed when we hear God calling us "beloved," too.

So maybe that is why Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry happen in such an ordinary way. We are meant to relate to it. We are not the Messiah, of course, but we, too, are God's children, claimed by God, beloved by God.

### **Holy Anointing Oil**

The text Ted read from Exodus 30 is a text that is read in many of the COGIC—Church of God in Christ—congregations in Benton Harbor at the start of the New Year.

The text gives God's people directions for how to mix anointing oil that would be used to anoint the priests and all the implements in the temple. Now, anointing oil is often used in the Bible to set aside ordinary people and quotidian things for holy uses. It is often used also as a blessing for God's healing. In this text, the people are instructed to anoint the furniture and other things as well as the priests. The idea is that when something is anointed, we expect God to show up there. So we anoint it for a holy purpose.

As we start the new year, it seems fitting for us to have our own kind of inauguration into the new year.

So that is what we are going to do today. We will pull this baptism and anointing together. This will be a time when we ordinary folk ponder this idea that we belong to God—that all of us are God's children—no matter who we are, what we've done or what we haven't done. That those of us who are baptized remember our baptisms and that we belong to God. These waters remind us that God has claimed us, that we bear God's "watermark." That nothing can separate us from God's love.

And as we remember our own baptisms and ponder Jesus' baptism, if we think about it there may be holy openings in our own lives when we have heard God call us "beloved." That voice may have been heard through the voice of a parent or a friend or an animal or something else in

nature or in the world. But there are holy openings all around us in our ordinary days, and our invitation is to pay attention because we never know when we may hear that voice calling us “beloved.”

Now, in the Exodus 30 passage there were only certain people who were set aside as priests. But in the New Testament we all are called “priests.” We are called the “priesthood” of believers, and while I have a unique job as a pastor, we are all called to be ministers of love in the world—in the schoolrooms while doing math problems, in the social work offices, at the hospital, on the garbage truck, in the kitchen, talking to a friend over coffee, changing a baby’s diaper, at the Livery, and so forth.

### **You Bear the Marks of God**

So, as we inaugurate this new year, we will participate in this Lord’s Supper, which nourishes us for this life of love we’ve been called to. And then you can dip your hands in the baptismal waters—remembering that you belong to God. And I want to say it again to you—you bear the mark of the water, the mark of God’s love, not because you are so holy, but because God’s love is so great, and God’s love reaches for and uses ordinary men and women like John the Baptist and you and me. And then you will be invited to go to one of the elders, who will anoint you with oil, remind you that you are God’s beloved, invite you to go forth and live the life of love you have been called to and then pray for you in any way you ask them to.

You will be invited to take a vial of oil with you. You can anoint your kitchen table or the place where you put on your makeup or even your car. And, as you do that, ask God to give you the grace to see him in these ordinary places of your life this year. You may also use this oil to pray for yourself and for others—placing a drop on your finger and making the sign of the cross or a heart.

Because you see, my brothers and sisters, you are beloved, and those of you who have been given the grace to receive God’s love are invited to lives of love each day. And for most of us,

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that love happens in the ordinary parts of our days—driving children to work, arguing with our spouse, eating dinner, watching TV, texting our friends, taking out the trash.

And it is often in those ordinary times that something holy opens up, and if we are given the grace we may be able to hear God's voice saying to us,

“You are my beloved child, delight of my life.”

Amen.