

**“GOD’S BELOVED”**  
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The decorations have been taken down. The Christmas trees recycled or boxed up for next year. Christmas is over. We’ve made it through that joyous, hectic, season filled with many emotions--some mixed. The song says, “It’s the happiest time of the year,” but for many, it is a season where pain has been accentuated and every year I listen to that pain in the form of stories told to me of loved ones lost or of loneliness or of disappointed expectations. Even the gifts we receive maybe symbolic of a blessing or if the gift doesn’t meet our expectations, it may symbolize a blessing we longed for but were not given. Not just at Christmas but throughout our lives, we are in search of a blessing. And so I always look forward to this Sunday’s text when we celebrate a blessing given to Jesus which is symbolic of the blessing given to each one of us.

Today’s gospel is about Jesus who is no longer the sweet babe in the manger or the 12 year old genius in the temple; he is now a man. And he goes to John the Baptist to be baptized. It’s hard to imagine a more awesome blessing than a dove resting on you and you hear a voice that says, “You are my beloved, my chosen, in you I am well pleased” (or as it is also translated) “in you I have taken delight.” At this moment it is clear that Jesus belongs to God uniquely, profoundly, and this blessing affirms it. The rest of his life he will extend that blessing of being beloved by God, of dwelling in God, and receiving ones breath and ones purpose from a divine calling. “In you I have taken delight.”

After receiving such a blessing, you’d think that something quite wonderful was about to happen, perhaps a party, but no, Jesus is led into the wilderness for 40 days to think about it. God wants to make sure Jesus knows just what this blessing of call and identity means. The blessing does not promise the absence of pain and struggle. So what does it tell us? It tells us that the blessing is God-given. Jesus did nothing to earn it. He did not complete a degree program or do good works in order to receive a blessing in return. He was just Jesus, and his blessing came from elsewhere, outside himself, from the one who he calls Abba, Daddy.

About 30 years ago, shortly after I’d graduated from college, I saw a film about the famous psychoanalyst Carl Jung. The only thing I remember from that film was this one idea of Jung’s: that “sometimes healing must come from the outside.” At that time, I suffered from very low self-esteem. I even remember one day looking in a mirror and thinking that before I had children I needed to learn to love myself, because I didn’t want to pass on to them a low self-esteem. I was trying so hard to heal myself and frustrated with the process. These words, “sometimes healing must come from the outside,” helped me a lot. I interpreted that “outside” to be the working of God, the grace of God, that would happen in my life somehow, someday. You know, you can’t make someone bless you. Neither can it be bought. The blessing is God’s to give. It is God’s grace to bestow upon us.

Marcus Borg describes this blessing of God’s presence with the following words: “we are in God, whether we know it or not; we belong to God, and God is present to us, whether we experience that presence or not. But we commonly live our lives ‘east of Eden,’ outside of paradise (where paradise is understood to be the manifest presence of God). Our problem is our estrangement, our blindness to the presence of God, our separation from the Spirit who is all around us and within us and to which we belong....The Christian life thus has at its center becoming conscious of that relationship. It is the response to the words of an unknown prophet who spoke of God’s presence and love in Israel’s time in exile, the gospel as found in the second half of the book of Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord, the one who created you, who formed you:

‘Do not be afraid, for I have delivered you. I have called you by name, and you are mine.

When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. (pp.77 & 79 of The God We

Never Knew.

When the church baptizes a baby or an adult it gives the blessing of God's presence. Baptism says for God and the community, "you are precious in our sight and honored, we love you and we will be with you." So the first lesson from this text is that this blessing comes from outside of us and cannot be bought or earned. It is God's gift.

The second thing about Jesus' blessing at his baptism and our blessing at our baptism is that the blessing is not ours to hoard but out of our gratitude for being blessed we offer the same to others within our community and our world. This extension of the blessing is the very reason for the church.

One powerful example of the church extending the blessing is the Amistad story. This is one example of how Christians feeling the blessing of freedom offered that blessing to a ship of African slaves long ago. You may have heard or seen this story portrayed in Steven Spielberg's film, *The Amistad*. I liked the movie but there were two problems with it for me. First, I don't do violence very well and had to close my eyes for the first few minutes. I mention that because if you see the film on my recommendation, I wanted you to be forewarned. My second problem was with how the Christians were portrayed. In the film they stood on the side of the walkway and at the prison gates singing rather mournful hymns, kneeling in prayer, while the Africans passed by. Though I wouldn't trivialize the importance of these signs of support, they did so much more.

The Amistad, which ironically means, "friendship" sailed in 1839 with 49 captured African men and 4 children. During the third night the Africans who believed they were to be killed staged a revolt and took command of the ship. They wanted to go home to Africa, and they believed they were going home as their ordered the helmsman to sail the ship east. But what that didn't know was that at night, he turned the ship around to sail north and west. In late August the ship was captured off Long Island and the Africans were arrested and charged with murder.

Those Christians lending their support were in a large number our religious ancestors, Congregationalists. They provided the legal aid and monetary support to the Africans who were imprisoned. They taught the Africans English and they found in New York an African who could translate the Mendi language so that they could communicate their defense. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court where John Quincy Adams argued in defense of the Africans. Eventually, the African slaves were freed, but then what. They were in a strange land with no means of returning home. So the Christians helped raise the money necessary over a period of two years so that these Africans could return to their homeland. So you see, they did more than sing hymns and prayer; they were advocates for freedom. Why? Perhaps because it was the moral thing to do. But there was another reason. You see, it hadn't been that long since their own ancestors had sought freedom from the abuse of the Church of England. And they had been blessed with the opportunity of finding their freedom in this new land, the blessing received was now theirs to bestow.

Those Christians who helped the slaves were called The Amistad Committee which later became the American Missionary Association, the largest abolitionist association in the United States prior to the Civil War. It started over 500 schools in the south to educate slaves and freed slaves; and some of those schools still exist. Dillard University in New Orleans, which was badly damaged by Katrina, is one of those schools. You can see the deep roots of social activism within our denomination's history. The Amistad story is one example of how the church as a blessed community can extend the blessing.

Next Wednesday, Jan. 11th, is a special anniversary for me because 16 years ago the girls and I moved to Claremont so I could attend the School of Theology. We were sent off with a blessing into what I call a blessed wilderness. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. I worked two and sometimes three part time jobs and tried to fit those jobs and my classes around the girls schedule because I wanted to be a good mom. The church was a place of blessing for me, and three years after coming to Claremont, I was ordained, graduated, and a week later married Tom.

Being blessed by God, doesn't mean the journey is always easy, but it means we are not alone. God is with us and we are with each other. And because of God's blessing, we offer ourselves to the world in faithful service. So today I leave you with this blessing: "You are God's beloved; in You God has taken great delight." Go forth and share God's blessing today and in all the days to come. AMEN