

Marjory Zoet Bankson: Remember Who You Are!

Sermon for Baptism of Isabel Wysockey-Johnson
at Seekers Church, Jan 12, 2003
by Marjory Zoet Bankson

Remember Who You Are!

HT Gen 1:1-5: *In the beginning, God created...*

NT Mark 1:4-11: *The baptism of Jesus... "You are my beloved child."*

Good morning.

Today is a very special day in the life of this community because we are gathered here to celebrate the baptism of Isabel Marie Wysockey-Johnson and to recall the power of baptism for all of us: created by God, beloved of God, chosen by God.

Created by God

It is so appropriate that the first reading for today is the story of creation, because we recognize that Isabel is a part of this ongoing story of creation. She is created by God, quickened into this particular life and blessed simply because she is a part of God's good creation.

Each day of the Genesis creation story ends with a blessing: *It is good*. Isabel is part of that story. We are part of that story. Matthew Fox calls this the doctrine of Original Blessing.

Try as we might, modern science still does not understand or control the life force that quickens an egg and sperm into the

person that Isabel already is. She is no clone. Although she carries DNA from Doug and Kathryn, she will not be like either one of them. She is unique. She is particular. She is an experiment of one, with her own call and destiny in this world. Created and blessed from the beginning.

Beloved of God

The New Testament reading for today is the story of Jesus' baptism. It ends with another blessing: *"You are my beloved on whom my favor rests."* Henri Nouwen speaks of this as the very heart of our identity. It was the core experience for Jesus. He is reminded in a deep, deep way of who he is. Everything else flows from that.

After his baptism, Jesus is tempted in the desert to move away from that identity. Nouwen says he was tempted to believe he was someone else: *"You are the one who can turn stone into bread. You are the one who can jump from the temple. You are the one who can make others bow to your power."* Nevertheless, Jesus said, **"No. No. I am God's beloved."** There were times when he was despised and rejected, but he kept coming back to this core identity: **"I am God's beloved."**

Baptism is a sign that Isabel is also God's beloved. That is the core of her identity, no matter what. She will be tempted, as we all are, to identify with power, success, or even another person. That is the nature of our human lives. However, God will pursue her and the baptized community will keep reminding her over the years: *"You are God's beloved. Remember who you are."*

When I was a teenager, beginning to go out with my friends, my mother would often say as I left the house, "Remember who you are!" It was her way of saying "Be good. Do not make us ashamed of you. Don't let other people define your choices." I have no doubt that it came out of her deep love for me as well as her fears about my independence.

God is not afraid of our independence. We were created to be independent, to make choices and experiment with our freedom. It is at the heart of our humanity and our ability to love. Without that freedom, love would be robotic obedience. God loved us first. Our freedom to love in return is the link between the creation story and being God's beloved.

Our job as a community is to remind Isabel that her identity is based on God's unfailing love as she grows and develops her ability to make choices. Week after week, in song and story, with tears and laughter, we are here to remind Isabel, and Doug and Kathryn, and each other too, that God has named each one of us as beloved sons and daughters. *Remember who you are!*

Chosen by God

I went back to [Cristy Benson's sermon](#) on the occasion of Peter's baptism because she brought us the gift of her Lutheran heritage. She gave us a good theology of infant baptism. Baptism, she said, means that Isabel has been chosen by God-and not the other way around. As a baby, baptism is not something that Isabel can choose for herself. She cannot weigh her options and make an informed decision. She is not in a position to take Jesus as her Lord and Saviour or even give her assent to this ceremony.

Rather, baptism is a sign that God is choosing Isabel. God is saying, "I love you. I want you in my community and you do not really have a choice in the matter." Despite any future faults or future choices, nothing can separate Isabel from God's love-neither rebellion nor failure nor abandoning church nor ignoring God-nothing can separate her from God. Baptism is a sign and seal of God's choosing Isabel.

The symbolism is clear. Baptism is a mini death and resurrection experience, recalling the transformation that took place when she was born – expelled from her internal Eden, the dark watery world of the womb where all her needs

were met ... into the air-breathing realm of light and language. This world is a harder place to be, but it is also more exciting and challenging, full of tantalizing substitutes for God.

I think Teilhard de Chardin spoke of birth as a sure sign of life after death. Because we have already lived through one such a physical transformation in being born, we can imagine another as we die. Baptism is a reminder of God's constancy through those physical changes—a sign of the mysterious presence of Eternal Spirit in our flesh, even unto death.

Being chosen by God means that baptism is also a sign of call. In the Gospel for today, baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Although we do not know much about the first 30 years of his life, we have a few stories that suggest a continuum...a flow from the basic relationship that Jesus had with his parents and community into consciousness that something more was possible. Baptism reminds us that **call is grounded in God's love for the world.**

Call unfolds from one stage of life to the next, deepening when it is grounded in our living relationship with God. Over time, Isabel will have the opportunity to develop the gifts woven into her very tissue. We believe God has chosen her for some good work in the world. She will be free to accept that mission—or not. Nevertheless, the fact is that long before she had a choice, she was chosen.

Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, we as a community will hold the story of God's call as Isabel grows into her full identity. We celebrate God's biblical story in worship and in our relationships like Christian communities all over the world. And if we, as Seekers, are not the community where Isabel finds herself when she is ready to begin the particular work that God has woven into her soul's DNA, we know that we are part of God's faithful community which stretches backward and forward in time, to remind Isabel who she is...and whose she

is.

As we celebrate Isabel's baptism, may we all remember that baptism means

- we are created by God and blessed as good from the very beginning;
- we are God's beloved at the core of our identity, even when we are tempted to believe otherwise;
- we have been chosen and called for some particular work in the world.

Remember who you are!

Amen.