



God's Great Plan of Salvation

A sermon by the Rev. Susan Bek
Baptism of Our Lord, Year A
January 19, 2020

Today is the feast of the Baptism of our Lord; the day when we remember Jesus being lowered into the Jordan river by John, his cousin; John who was referred to as, “the Baptist.”

As we heard in the reading, John the Baptist wasn't very comfortable with this idea at first. He wondered why in the world Jesus would want to be baptized by a simple mortal, like himself. But Jesus insisted because we each have a role to play.

And it's true. Not only did John the Baptist have an important role to play, but each and every one of us does too. God didn't go through all the effort of becoming incarnate, being made human, to keep us at a distance, but because God wants to be in close relationship with us. We are each beloved children of God.

In today's sermon, we will explore the gospel and the lesson from the Acts of the Apostles. We'll talk about the Baptism of our Lord and seek to find the answer to this important question, “Who is God's great plan of salvation intended to save?”

In the lesson from Acts this morning, we entered as Peter was preaching to the household of Cornelius but, if you look back and read a little more of the chapter, you'll see that Peter had just had an amazing vision. Three times he was given the message, “What God has made clean you must not call profane.”¹

Peter was pondering the vision, greatly puzzled by what he had seen. Animals and foods he knew to be forbidden and unacceptable were, in the vision, offered to him and referred to as “clean.” What could that mean? While he wrestled with his thoughts, a group of men come asking for him. They had been sent by their master, Cornelius. Cornelius was a centurion who lived in Caesarea, and, he too, had recently experienced an amazing vision. Acts 10:3-5 tells us,

One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius.” He stared at him in terror and said,

¹ Acts 10:15

“What is it, Lord?” He answered, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter...”²

And that is how it came about that these men were searching for Peter that day. When Peter asked the men why they had come, they answered,

“Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.”³

So, Peter went to the house, and when he arrived, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him but Peter made him get up saying, “stand up. I am only a mortal.”⁴ (That’s similar to how John the Baptist responded to Jesus!)

And to the many people, a whole group of gentiles assembled in the house, Peter spoke and explained why he was there even though it was forbidden for devout Jews to associate with Gentiles.

He said, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection.”⁵

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

Peter went on to give a great sermon on the work of Jesus and, while he was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, all of them, not just the Jews, the Gentiles too, everyone!

And at this, Peter said, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he ordered that they all should be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Let’s stop and consider for a minute what happened in this lesson. Non-Jews were baptized. They didn’t convert to Judaism first, they didn’t have to be circumcised or keep

² Acts 10:3-5

³ Acts 10:22

⁴ Acts 10:26

⁵ Acts 10:28-29a

Kosher or study the Torah, or anything! It was not because of where they came from, or the customs they kept, or who they were, that they were offered to become a part of God's great plan of salvation. They received it as a gift, a wonderful gift. Not because of their deserving but because of God's amazing grace and love. And isn't that how each of us is invited, not because of our deserving but because of God's amazing grace and love.

So, let's return to the question I posed at the beginning. Who is God's great plan of salvation intended to save? These lessons make it clear that the answer is – everyone.

This is a tough idea for many people to accept. Recognizing that we, as well as everyone we meet, are beloved of God is an important lesson that all these years later, we're still trying to learn.

On this day when we remember the baptism of Our Lord, Jesus Christ and on this weekend when we remember Martin Luther King, Jr. let us stir within ourselves courage like Simon who was called Peter and remember that what makes a person holy and acceptable to God is not what they look like, where they come from or how they worship. It is up to God to choose whom to love, and God chooses to love us all.

And when Jesus had been baptized, 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."⁶

And as we remember this voice from the heavens, the calling out of God who claims Jesus as his own, let us remember that we are also God's beloved and that God claims us, every single one of us, too.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶ Matthew 3:16-17