



“Ta da!”

Scripture – Matthew 3:13-17

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

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The wide receiver makes a sensational one-handed catch for the winning touchdown and the roar of the fans is deafening. He strikes a triumphant pose. Ta da! The student strides across the stage as the principal announces that out of the graduating class of 450, she is number one. Ta da! The actress hears her name called and rushes down the aisle and up onto the stage. She is so choked up that words will not come, but she thrusts her Oscar into the air. Ta da! The artist is finally satisfied with the painting he has been struggling over for weeks. As he makes the final brush stroke and steps back to admire his masterpiece, he gestures with his brush. Ta da!

The baptism of Jesus is a biblical version of “Ta da!” To set the scene, John the Baptist has been standing on the banks of the Jordan River preaching one of his hellfire and damnation sermons to a crowd who has come out to hear him. Among those gathered are some Pharisees and Sadducees. John comes down especially hard on them; threatening that they had better turn their lives around to live a God-inspired life – or else!

As he wraps up his scorching sermon, he wades into the river a few yards from shore and says to the onlookers, “If any of you are ready to clean up your life, now is the time to show it.” He challenges them to wash away their past, to cleanse their soul, and to begin living a life in harmony with God’s commandments and the prophets of old.

What happens next? The gospels fail to tell us whether dozens of people leap into the river at once, or if the procession to John begins with a solitary individual who slowly plods through the water; either way, more and more take the plunge. They are ready to wash away their dishonesty, cleanse their heart of jealousy, rinse the malice from their mind and scrub the greed from their thoughts. One after another people wade up to John who is standing in waist deep water. He is eager to perform the ritual bath for people determined to live a life free of the muck that sullies their soul.

We have no details regarding the manner with which John performed these baptisms. Did he grab hold of them, dunk them under the water and hold them beneath the surface until they were gasping for air? A dramatic reminder that a life of sin will lead to their demise.

Perhaps he splashed them several times with water. Gentle splashes for the weak; crashing waves for the obstinate. Perhaps he dipped his cupped hands into the flowing water, raised it over the person’s head and let it sprinkle down on his face and drip down over his chest. Maybe John used a shell as we do here.

There are no reports on John’s method, but the symbolism is unmistakable. As bathing in water cleanses us, John’s baptism represents the cleaning of one’s soul so that he/she can a fresh start.

John is baptizing people left and right when something unexpected happens. Suddenly Jesus is standing face to face with him and John hesitates. “Oh no,” John howls.

John was a charismatic figure who liked to be in control of the situation, but when his cousin Jesus appeared, it threw him off stride. John blurted out, “I need to be baptized by you.” But, Jesus convinced John to proceed. Despite the awkward situation, John did baptize Jesus.

You may have a picture in your head prompted by one of the many artists through the centuries who have painted their idea of the scene – Leonardo, Giotto, El Greco.

Then Jesus saw God’s Spirit descend on him, and he heard a voice say, “Ta da! This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Or, as *The Message* translation of the Bible puts it: “This is my Son marked by my love and the delight of my life!”

Now, the wide receiver knows that years of weight training and 100 degree workouts have led to his shining moment in the end zone. The student knows that cracking the books until midnight and on weekends was the uphill path that paved the way to her top grades. The actress knows that all of the speech classes and acting in third rate movies finally paid off. The artist knows that he toiled over a thousand paintings before he produced his masterpiece.

But what about Jesus? What did he do prior to this “Ta da!” moment? He had not healed a single person. He had not resisted the devil, told a parable, preached a sermon, or stood up to a corrupt leader. This “Ta da!” moment was *before*, not after he had accomplished anything noteworthy.

It is exactly the same with us. God does not wait for us to accomplish something worthy before saying, “You are my beloved child.” God gushes over us and says, “You are my daughter,” or “You are my son” before we utter our first word.

I suspect this does not sit well with a bunch of Type A personalities who are ambitious, proactive, and driven to succeed at whatever we do. We expect to be rewarded for accomplishments. We assume we must earn our status. That is the way of the world. But it is not the way of God. The gospels make clear that after Jesus is baptized, he is propelled into the wilderness where he will undergo a fierce test – a duel with the devil. But he does not go as one who believes he must prove himself in order to win God over to his side. He goes with the full confidence that he is a beloved child of God. It is not something he must achieve. It is an established fact.

Perhaps the confusion is that with the baptism of Jesus and with the birth of each of us, the “Ta da!” moment belongs to God. God looks at each of us and says, “Another masterpiece!”

What would your life be like if every morning when you awake and you are still rubbing the sleep from your eyes, and you have not yet put on your identity for the day – lawyer, mother, IT specialist, volunteer, whatever – how would it affect your approach to the day if you began by saying, “I am a child of God and God loves me more than I can imagine?”

How much calmer might you be? How much kinder to yourself might you be? How much more understanding might you be? How much better connected to God might you be?

Tom Long tells of an essay he read in which “a woman was reminiscing about her father. She said that when she was young, she was very close to him. She experienced this closeness the most at large family gatherings with all the aunts and uncles and cousins. At some point, someone would always pull out the old record player and put on

polka music and everyone would dance. Eventually, someone would put on the ‘Beer Barrel Polka,’ and as the song began, her father would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder and say, ‘I believe this is our dance,’ and they would dance and laugh and have the best time. One time, though, when she was a teenager and in one of her contrary moods, the ‘Beer Barrel Polka’ began and when her father tapped her on the shoulder and said, ‘I believe this is our dance,’ she snapped at him, ‘Leave me alone!’ Her father turned away and never asked her to dance again.”

The woman wrote, “Our relationship was difficult all through my teen years. When I would come home late from a date, my father would be sitting there in his chair, half asleep, wearing an old bathrobe, and I would snarl at him, ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ He would look at me with sad eyes and say, ‘I was just waiting for you.’”

She continued, “When I went away to college, I was so glad to get out of that house and for years I barely communicated with him. But then, as I grew older, I began to miss him.”

“One day I decided to go to the next family gathering, and predictably, someone put on the ‘Beer Barrel Polka.’ I drew a deep breath, walked over to my father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, ‘I believe this is our dance.’ He looked up and said, ‘I’ve been waiting for you.’”¹

In some ways, God is like that father – always there, waiting for us to draw closer, and waiting for us to affirm our status as the delight of God’s life.

NOTES

1. Thomas G. Long, “Is There Joy in God’s House?” *Day1.org*, 2004