

Why Jesus? Because Jesus is Relationship.  
Pastor Lisa Kipp

**Matthew 3:1-17 NRSV**

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup>This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

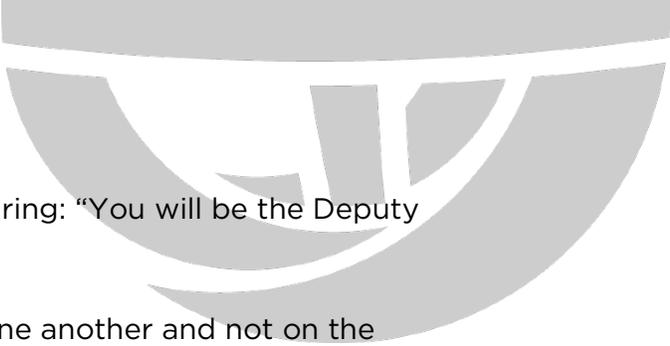
<sup>4</sup>Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup>But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor;’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup>Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup>“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” <sup>15</sup>But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.” Then he consented. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Last spring as I was planning my summer sabbatical, I had all kinds of questions about how I would spend my time, wondering specifically about my time at Iambi Hospital in Tanzania. After all, I’m not a doctor or nurse, I wouldn’t have a Zumbro team to lead, and I wasn’t particularly interested in becoming a traveling preacher. I asked Manase Msengi, the director of the hospital, how my time in the village



could be helpful. He paused only briefly before declaring: “You will be the Deputy Director of Iambi Hospital.”

I’ll be honest. It’s a good thing we were messaging one another and not on the phone so that he couldn’t hear my outburst of laughter. Let me be clear – I missed the day of seminary that provided instruction on being in hospital administration, in Africa nonetheless. I continued to joke with some of my friends and colleagues about my new title before I left. But what I quickly realized upon my arrival to the Central Diocese was that our partners in Tanzania weren’t joking. I was the Deputy Director of Iambi Hospital. When I attended meetings this summer, it’s how I was introduced. It dictated what place at the table was mine, and the weight my voice carried. Now there are a million reasons this distinction makes me uncomfortable, but I also soon realized that by not claiming this identity, I was insulting our partners for the honor they intended as they named me.

Soon I realized that my new name changed my relationship with the staff of the hospital. Somehow, in small ways, the different color of my skin, and size of my bank account, and country of origin seemed to matter a little less; and what it was that we held in common – a shared commitment to the staff and patients of Iambi Hospital – took priority. Being named mattered after all.

Perhaps that is one of the greatest lessons this biblical story of Jesus’ baptism has to teach us. Being named matters. Sure, there are any number of good questions we could ask about the theological significance of this event: Why does Jesus need to be baptized? What exactly is John’s role and significance? The gospel writers and the church have long wrestled with these questions. But if we ask the question we’re continually up against in this sermon series: *Why Jesus? Why does Jesus matter to me?* We discover the answer when the heavens open up and the voice from above claims Jesus in relationship and declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Because here’s the thing – these words aren’t only spoken at Jesus’ baptism; they’re spoken at ours, too. In our baptism Jesus claims us in relationship and names us beloved.

I appreciate how New York Times best selling author and theologian [Rachel Held Evans](#) describes the significance of this naming that happens in baptism. Take a look.

*I really think that baptism is an acknowledgement of people’s belovedness, and when we treat it like that ... in the orthodox tradition a part of the baptismal service is a renunciation of Satan and his demons and of evil. The way I look at that and apply that is that baptism is a renunciation of all the competing voices that try to tell you who you are. The world gives you names like screw-up, faker, fat, slut,*





*addict ... in baptism you're named beloved. The demons, the world beckons with rich, powerful, pretty, bright ... in baptism you're told you are beloved and that is enough.*

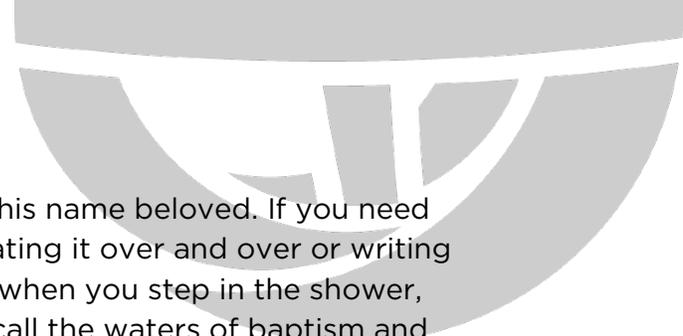
*I think that everyone wants to be told who they are, and in baptism we're told that we are a beloved child of God and to renounce anything that says otherwise. It's a defiant thing to do. I look at baptism as defiance, because the world will always try to name us, and in baptism we say "no, my name is beloved." Whether that happens when you're an infant and you're remembering your baptism as God naming you beloved, or whether it happens as an adult, I think that when we think about the significance of our baptism it's that we are named by God, and that is enough. It is good news.*

So is it enough? Is it enough for you to claim being called beloved? Some days, perhaps on our worst days, your first response might be similar to mine after being named deputy director - to laugh and dismiss the distinction. But what if owning the name made a difference? What if owning that you are beloved impacted your voice and your place at the table? What if owning your name beloved meant that not only your relationship with God was changed, but that your relationship with those whom God loves was changed also?

You see the catch is that when we claim that we are beloved, we also must recognize all of the other beloved by God people running around in our midst. And that's not easy to do, because we don't agree with all of those beloved people. Some of them don't look anything like us. Some of them don't understand God the same way that we do. Some of them don't vote the same way we do, or express themselves in the same way we do. Some of them think the answer is to build a wall, and some can hardly bear to discuss the possibility. And yet we can't claim our belovedness without acknowledging that God looks also at them (at all of them) and says, "You are my beloved child."

Our quick judgments, the vitriol that infiltrates our political debates and conversations, too easily cause all of us to lose sight of the love that God has for others, particularly those that we don't agree with. A few months ago Marc Thiessen, a writer for the Washington Post Writers Group, wrote the following: "Progressives are not stupid and evil. Conservatives are not racists and misogynists. Our fellow Americans who disagree with us are not our enemies. They are our fellow Americans who differ with us." And, I might add, they are beloved by God. I'm reminded of one of Mother Teresa's nuggets of wisdom, "If you judge people, you have no time to love them."





Here's my challenge for you this week. Remember this name beloved. If you need to remember it for yourself, start everyday by repeating it over and over or writing it down, "I am beloved." When you wash your face, when you step in the shower, even when you wash the water over your hands, recall the waters of baptism and know that you are named beloved.

And as you do that, remember also that the politician you disagree with, or the family member who is constantly under your skin, or the colleague who can't quite get her job right is also named beloved. And maybe, just maybe, if we can celebrate that holiness and worthiness and belovedness of us all, we will see more clearly see that indeed, the kingdom of heaven has come near. Amen.

