

“The Right Words”

And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11).

In 1992, Duke and Kentucky played in the regional final of the NCAA Basketball Tournament. The winner would go on to play Indiana in the Final Four and the loser would go home. At the end of regulation, the score was tied. In overtime, the two teams continued to battle, matching each other basket for basket, every shot bigger than the last and, as time on the clock began to run down, Kentucky had the ball and was losing by one point. With less than three seconds to go in the game, Kentucky guard Sean Woods came off a screen and banked in an incredible shot to give Kentucky a one-point lead. Duke immediately called a timeout and both teams headed to the sideline. The score was 103 to 102, 2.1 seconds remained on the clock, and Duke had to go the length of the floor and score against a very talented defense. Kentucky fans were already celebrating and nearly everyone in the arena assumed that the great game was over.

Basketball fans know what happened next. The teams came out after the timeout and got into place for the final play. When the whistle blew, Grant Hill threw a pass that traveled 80 feet in the air. It was caught by Christian Laettner who faked to his right, then spun to his left and lofted a turnaround jump shot over the outstretched arms of a Kentucky defender and, as the clock hit zero, the ball exploded through the net to give Duke the win.

This play is often referred to as “The Shot” and, whether you love or hate Duke, it’s one of the most iconic college basketball plays of all-time. But one the most amazing things about this play occurred in the timeout right before it happened. Like everyone else in the arena, the Duke players felt like the game was over and as they made their way to the bench their spirits appeared broken. Coach Krzyzewski waited for all his players to get back to the bench and before he gave them any instructions about the final play, he stared them in the face and said: “We’re going to win this game.” Talking later about this experience, the Duke players pointed to these words from their coach as the turning point in the game. What he said during that final timeout created hope when hope was lost, and even if you hate Duke, you have to appreciate what happened in that huddle.

You see, the right words can make all the difference and that is one of the great lessons in today’s Gospel reading. In this account of Jesus’ Baptism, as He came up out of the Jordan, heaven itself was “torn open,” the Spirit descended on Jesus “like a dove,” and in that moment the Father spoke these words: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). In these words from the Father, some amazing things happen. First, we are told who Jesus is and these words make it crystal clear that He is not simply a good man or a skilled teacher or even a prophet. In these words, the Father makes the announcement that Jesus is God; the same God who created the world in Genesis, the same God who chose Abraham and called Moses, the same God who spoke through the prophets. “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Here, the voice of the Father removed any doubt about who this carpenter from Nazareth truly was and these words from the Father also show that in that moment God’s plan for our salvation was unfolding.

In Colossians, Paul wrote, “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things...by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:19-20). That’s what the voice of the Father tells us and in His Words spoken at the Baptism of Jesus a new reality was created...and that’s exactly what God does in our Baptism as well. The right words make all the difference and in the same way that God spoke the universe into existence, and anointed Jesus at the Jordan River, God’s Word creates something new in the waters of our Baptism. And we desperately need

this Word, because we do not naturally have a relationship with God. We hear this terrible truth at every Baptism when we are told that, “we are all conceived and born sinful” and “we would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation” (LSB, 268). My friends, this is our nature! We are sinful people from the moment of our conception and this means that we are natural-born enemies of God; we are separated from Him; and, in our sin and in ourselves we have no road back to the Father.

That is why the Baptism of Jesus is so important! You see, this was no trivial event in Jesus’ earthly life, instead in His Baptism He identified with us; He was connected to our sin! Jesus didn’t need to be baptized for forgiveness – the Bible is clear that He was without sin (Hebrews 4:15) – but Jesus’ Baptism was absolutely necessary, because in His Baptism, He took on *our* sin; He began to carry the burden of all that *we* have done to separate ourselves from God. He carried our greed; He carried our anger; He carried our lack of compassion and our love of self. In Jesus’ Baptism, He began His job as our sin-bearer and our substitute and He did not stop until His work was finished on the Cross.

Jesus’ Baptism most certainly mattered...*and so does yours*, because in the miracle of Holy Baptism, God binds us to our Savior. In Baptism, God connects us to the Cross of Jesus! That’s why Paul wrote in today’s epistle reading, “do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death” (Romans 6:3-4). You see, God does more than simply improve us...He completely makes us new and in order for us to be recreated by His Word, our sinful selves have to be put to death. And that is exactly what happens in our Baptism. Steven Paulsen writes that “Baptism is not a human act of obedience to a law; it is God’s attack on sin by attacking the actual sinner; it is death.”

By the Word of God, connected to the waters of Baptism, we have been crucified with Christ. In our Baptism, we have died to sin and our lives are buried with Jesus. *How can this be?* Because God said so! And by His justifying Word connected to the waters of Baptism we have been crucified and we have been raised with Jesus as new creatures who are free from sin and to whom life has been given. And this is true because God said it!

In Galatians Paul tells us that, “all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). This means that as Baptized believers, dead to sin and alive in Christ we have the promise from Scripture that when God looks at us He doesn’t see our greed or our anger, or our lack of compassion or our selfishness...because *it is dead!* Baptism means that when God looks at you He sees Christ. And this new life isn’t based on anything you have done. It is based on the creating, redeeming, sanctifying Word of God.

God’s message to mankind – *His Good News to us today* – is that we have been accepted because of what Christ has done for us. He has carried our sin. He has taken our punishment. He has defeated death. This is what we have been given in our Baptism into Christ, and because this is true, Heaven has been opened to us and we can live a new life by faith, without fear and without doubt, because it all depends on him.

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians he writes, “you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:11-12). What a powerful message! In Baptism, *God speaks* and *His Word creates* and there He said to *you*, just as He said to Jesus, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” God spoke these words at the Baptism of Jesus, He spoke these words at your Baptism and, with the same voice that brought light and life into existence He speaks these words to you today. Rejoice and share these right words of God.

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