

My Precious

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on January 10, 2016]

I

The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien is one of the most popular children's books of all time—

in spite of the cinematic excesses of Peter Jackson.

Hobbits, as you probably know, are intelligent creatures,

short in stature,

with hairy feet that have tough, leathery soles.

Hobbits like good food—

six meals a day, when they can get them—

and they especially enjoy the peace and quiet of their idyllic country,

“the Shire.”

The protagonist of *The Hobbit* is Bilbo Baggins, who goes off on an adventure with 13 dwarves and a wizard named Gandalf.

In the course of the adventure Bilbo encounters a repulsive little creature named Gollum,

who possesses a magic ring that makes the one who wears it invisible.

Gollum refers to the ring as “my precious.”

But Gollum loses the ring,

which is then found by our hero, Bilbo.

When Gollum loses “his precious,”
 he becomes like a drug addict needing a fix.

He will not rest until he has done everything possible to regain the ring for himself.

In Tolkien’s tale there is nothing really “precious” about the ring.

It is in fact an evil ring that represents anything and everything that we lust after,
 that demeans and dehumanizes us,
 that taunts us,
 tempts us,
 and lures us
 to do most anything to get what we “must have”—
 which is often exactly what we should “never have.”

The irony of the story is that Gollum spends his entire wretched life searching
 ruthlessly for that which has stripped him of life.

He is obsessed with the idea that if he just regains the ring,
 he will reclaim his life—
 he will have “his precious” again.

II

Once each year,
 on the First Sunday after Epiphany,
 the church takes a short rest stop by the Jordan River
 to overhear God whispering to his baptized Son,
 “My precious.”

On the same stop, the church looks back to the days of Isaiah
 when God whispers to his adopted children of Israel,
 “My precious.”

Both biblical stories reverse Gollum’s search.

These are not stories about searching for something to save us.

They are stories about trusting in a God who seeks us out and saves us from such futile searches.

When Gollum hisses and spurts “my precious,”
the words have a sinister sound to them.

When God whispers “my precious” to the Israelites
and then to Jesus on the day of his baptism,
the words have a gracious and affirming sound.

These words reminded Israel of its God-given identity
and they do the same for Jesus.

If baptism is about anything,
it’s about knowing who we are
so we don’t waste life’s precious time searching frantically
for an identity that something or someone else
can confer on us.

Instead, we are called to use life’s precious time to live out our God-given identity.

Now, to be honest, some Christians think of baptism much as Gollum thinks about the ring—
as a magical force that will leave them invisible to the worst onslaughts of life.

Some of you have seen the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, a whimsical retelling of Homer’s *Odyssey* set in Mississippi in the 1930s—
today’s anthem is a song from that movie.

Three hapless convicts—
Everett, Pete and Delmar—

escape from the chain gang and are hiding out in the woods,
running from the law.

There they encounter a procession of white-robed people going down to the river
to be baptized.

As they move toward the water the people are singing (along with our choir)...

*As I went down to the river to pray,
studyin' about that good ol' way and who shall wear the starry crown.
Good Lord, show me the way....
O sisters, let's go down, let's go down, come on down.
Come on brothers, let's go down, down to the river to pray.*

Delmar is overwhelmed by the beauty and the mystery of the sacrament and he
runs into the water and is baptized by the minister.

As he returns to his companions, he declares that he is now redeemed and “neither
God nor man’s got nothing on me now.”

The minister told him that all his sins have been washed away, “including,” he
says, “that Piggly-Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo.”

“I thought you said you were innocent of those charges,” Everett says.

“I lied,” he says, “and that’s been washed away too!”

Later the three convicts steal a pie from a window sill.

And Delmar, the one whose sins have been washed away, returns and places a
dollar bill on the window sill.

Delmar wasn’t made perfect by his baptism any more than any of the rest of us are
made perfect by our baptism.

But he was conscious that it was time for him to make a new beginning.

III

That, too, is why the church returns to the Jordan River every year—

to remind the magically inclined that the tempted,
 tortured,
 betrayed,
 and executed Jesus was also baptized.

His baptism dispels any magical notion that baptism is some sort of holy religious shield that deflects tragedies from coming our way.

Baptism doesn't make fantasy real,
 so that all who are baptized can live in peaceful and quiet places like "the Shire"—
 places free from hunger or disease or abuse,
 places devoid of vicious gossip or random violence,
 communities of pure peace and delight.

Baptism makes just the opposite claim.

This is anticipated by the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you...you are precious in my sight." (43:3-4)

Isaiah doesn't say "if" but "when"—
 when you pass through the waters,
 the rivers,
 the fires,
 and the flames of life.

Even then, God promises, "You are precious in my sight."

That's the promise Jesus hears at his baptism, as Eugene Peterson translates God's words in *The Message*:

“You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”

Through Jesus we hear again at every baptism the promise that God not only knows us by name—

God calls us to wear proudly that God-given baptismal name.

IV

In all of the gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus,
one question remains unanswered:

Why was Jesus baptized?

Why did he need to be baptized?

After all, according to John, baptism is for the purpose of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

What did Jesus need to repent of?

And what did he need to be forgiven for?

Actually, when you think about it, Jesus never baptizes a soul.

Instead, Jesus submits to baptism himself,
kneeling in the mud and the muck of the Jordan River.

For the same reason that he is born in a manger,
for the same reason that he dines with prostitutes and tax collectors,
for the same reason he cries and prays and agonizes alone in the
Garden of Gethsemane,
for the same reason that he dies a very painful, human death.

**Quite simply Jesus comes to be like us,
so that we can grow to be like him.**

**Jesus is baptized into our humanity,
so that we can be baptized into his divinity.**

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, those who are baptized in the same font become siblings—

they are considered the same flesh and blood—
they are kin one with another.

In this sense, Jesus became siblings with the crowd,
all those with whom he was baptized in the River Jordan.

When we are baptized into Christ in the waters of this font,
we too become siblings—with Christ and with one another.

And we are called to share in his life and ministry,
bringing God's grace and mercy to a world of poverty,
oppression,
and violence.

V

One of the great Jewish authors of the 20th century was Chaim Potok.

Chaim Potok wanted to be a writer from an early age, but when he went to college, his mother took him aside and said,

“Chaim, I know you want to be a writer, but I have a better idea. Why don't you be a brain surgeon? You'll keep a lot of people from dying, and you'll make a lot of money.”

Chaim replied, “No Mama, I want to be a writer.”

He returned home from vacation. His mother again pulled him aside and said,

“Chaim, I know you want to be a writer, but listen to your mama. Be a brain surgeon: they keep a lot of people from dying, and they make a lot of money.”

Chaim replied, “I want to be a writer.”

This conversation went on throughout his college years until, at the end, his mother in desperation again said,

“Chaim, you’re wasting your time. Be a brain surgeon. You’ll keep a lot of people from dying, and you’ll make a lot of money’.

Finally, Chaim exploded,

“Mama, I don’t want to keep people from dying. I want to show them how to live! I want to be a writer.”

When you and I embrace our baptism,
we set aside all other choices to follow the One who shows us how to live
and how to live up to our God-given identity.

VI

Living up to our God-given identity can be a tricky business.

Over the years too often the church has given its members the mistaken notion that our Christian identity,
our God-given name,
has a limited time and place.

We’ve been taught that faith and politics,
Christian discipleship and public policy,
don’t belong in the same room,
certainly not in the same conversation.

After all, we’re here in church not as Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, or Independents.

We are here as the gathered body of Christ,

as Christians,
the church.

What a false dichotomy the church has too often preached and we've believed!

Part of being claimed by God,
being called "precious" by God,
and being washed in the waters of baptism
is being called to step into any realm—
political,
social,
economic—
on behalf of those whose God-given name is being demeaned
or diminished.

For every realm is governed by the justice and mercy of God.

God is present in every place where the innocent suffer violence and abuse—
where the poor are oppressed
and the hungry are not fed.

The baptism service calls for parents on behalf of their child,
or the adult being baptized,
to renounce sin and evil—
not just in themselves
but in the world at large.

Some Christians mistake such a promise as simply a personal, moral tidying up.

But it is a promise that implies far more than that.

One pastor who served in a very poor neighbor in New York City wrote:

“It is impossible to pronounce these [baptismal] words and send the children out like lambs to the slaughter. It is impossible to [announce] ... ‘You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever’, and do nothing as they go off to substandard schools that virtually seal their failure to survive in today’s economy... Why must the church fight and work for better public schools? Is there no better reason than the baptism of these children? Are we going to stand by and allow [the Canaanite god] Molech to snatch them from us as so much prison fodder? Once we’ve said no to the devil [at baptism], we need to keep saying it: Hell no!”

VII

Sisters and brothers, once each year, the church stops by the Jordan,
 but not for an interesting history lesson about Jesus’ baptism
 or to gawk at John the Baptist’s strange dress
 and peculiar eating habits.

We stop to remember who we are and who we are called to be through our baptism into Christ—

whether it be advocating for outstanding public education throughout our nation so that no child is left behind,
 working for an end to the gun violence that claims the lives of over 30,000 of our fellow citizens every year,
 or urging our elected leaders to use their influence to slow the emission of greenhouse gases that are quickly warming our planet.

Our baptism name,
 our baptized identity,
 refuses to reduce the Christian faith only to Bible study and prayer and praise songs—
 though I hope we will continue to study and pray and sing to the glory of God throughout 2016.

Our baptism name,
 our baptized identity,
 delivers us from Gollum's search,
 from hunting for something or someone that can save us.

By God's grace Christ has already done that and has commissioned us to be his agents of reconciliation in the world.

Our baptism name,
 our baptized identity,
 won't let us sit content in our safe sanctuaries
 while so many of God's children are threatened in an unsafe world.

Why?

Because God loves the world and God sends us out into the world with the baptismal assurance that we are precious in God's sight,
 that God knows each of us by name,
 and that God loves and cares for us each moment of each day.

We are not alone.

*Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,
 For I am thy God and will still give thee aid;
 I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand
 Upheld by my righteous omnipotent hand.*

God has laid claim not only to us but to all those whom the world treats not nearly so well.

Once each year the church stops by the banks of the River Jordan where we remember our baptism,
 when we give thanks that we are precious in God's sight,
 and when we remember that our Christian work is not done—

not nearly done—
until every last human being
and every living creature
knows that they too are precious
in God's sight.

Do you remember...

do you remember learning that in Sunday school
when you were about the size of a Hobbit?...

*“Red and yellow,
Black and white,
They are precious in his sight...
Jesus loves the little children of the world.”*

Amen.

Sources:

Gary W. Charles, sermon retrieved from <https://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=5271>

“O Brother, Where Art Thou,” illustration retrieved from <http://www.sermons.com/theResultsPage.asp?firstLogin=>