

EPIPHANY ONE, BAPTISM OF JESUS, YEAR C, JANUARY 12, 2025

When Lindsey Crittenden was a little girl, she was practicing that magical trick of floating on your back in the swimming pool. Her swim teacher explained if you flap and flail you will sink. But if you just relax the water will hold you. That phrase "the water will hold you" became the title for Crittenden's memoir: *The Water Will Hold You; A Skeptic Learns to Pray*.

Think about that phrase for a moment, "just relax, the water will hold you." It's a great and powerful summary of the reading for this week about the baptism of Jesus, and, by extension, our own baptisms. In the waters of baptism we hear the promises of God from Isaiah 43: "You are my beloved. Do not fear. I have called you by name. You are mine. You are precious in my sight, and I love you. I am with you."

Jesus's baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with all the people of Jerusalem." He allied himself with the faults and failures, the pains and the problems, and with all the broken and hurting people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside them and us and among us. Not long into his public mission, the religious leaders derided Jesus as a "friend of gluttons and sinners." They were right about that.

With his baptism, Jesus openly and decisively stood shoulder to shoulder with us in our fears and anxieties. He intentionally took sides with people who were cast aside for numerous reasons and by doing so declared that God's love for them was unconditional. God's abundant mercy, Jesus declared, is available freely and fully to every person; it's not the private preserve doled out by the temple establishment in Jerusalem or by those today who want to limit God's grace.

Jesus's baptismal solidarity with people who have been ostracized, criticized and not deemed worthy or good enough was vividly confirmed when Jesus heard a voice declaring that he was God's beloved son. This message embodied Jesus' ministry as he embodied God's unconditional love for all people everywhere.

There is a story that author Rachel Held Evan told in one of her books that emphasized what this message about being God's beloved is all about. A friend of hers was excited about his upcoming adult baptism. She asked him to tell her his story about how and why his baptism was such a big deal.

Andrew had grown up in a very conservative church where his father was the pastor. He always felt loved by the church but when he became an adolescent he started realizing while his friends were starting to notice girls he was starting to notice boys. He'd been taught that that was a horrible sin and struggled and prayed and begged God to take it from him, but it wouldn't go away. His father had never baptized him because he told him he wasn't good enough; he wasn't holy enough because he hadn't manifested enough of the fruits of the Spirit to be earning the rite of baptism.

Then Andrew went off to college and found a wonderful church that embraced him and welcomed him in as a beloved child of God. He felt that support and that love that he'd been longing for. In his freshman year at Thanksgiving, he made the decision that he had to be honest with his family. So, with his new church family praying for him when he arrived home, he came out to his family and it didn't go well. The last thing his father said to him was that he was going to hell. His family cut him off.

Andrew went back to college, embraced by this community, and now he was on the verge of experiencing his baptism. Rachel Held Evans then understood that his church family—that household of God—was the only family he now had. She wrote, “Sometimes the church must be a refuge even to our own refugees.” At his baptism Andrew said, “I put off baptism because I felt like I was in a state of sin, like I wasn’t good enough or fit enough to be baptized. But then I realized that baptism is done at the beginning of your faith journey, not in the middle or the end. You don’t have to have everything together to be baptized...you just have to grasp God’s grace. God’s grace is enough.” You see the waters of baptism will hold you.

In his own baptism, Jesus received a new name — he was beloved by God. Vicki Flippin of Yale Divinity School says, “I tell folks that baptism is the church declaring what has always been true, that each of us belongs to God and only to God. The child is claimed by God above all other claims.” Many malignant forces try to name and claim us. Baptism reminds us that first and foremost, above and beyond all other claims — however legitimate or oppressive — we belong to God. God knows and calls us by name.

We don't belong to our boss or our spouse. We don't belong to abusive behavior or our addictive impulses. We're not defined by sickness, success or failure. We don't belong to the political propagandists or the advertising industry. We're not the sum total of our poor choices, painful memories, or even our bad dreams.

"Even though it might feel like, look like, smell like, hurt like you belong to all these other things," says Flippin, "as sure as water is wet and God is good, a voice out of the heavens says: 'You belong to God.' Our baptism reminds us that no one determines our worth in this world or in the next and God declares we are good and loved."

Isaiah too reminds us that we are all beloved, all of us are chosen, whether we take the time to acknowledge it or whether we ever decide to live in the light of that truth. That’s why we baptize people, whether they are infants or adults. We want to sign them, mark them, brand them, so they can never forget that they too have been loved from the moment of their birth, they have been chosen for a God-filled life, and that God’s love will never let them go.

And with that understanding of baptism we go into the world proclaiming kindness and love, justice and mercy, patience and grace. We offer what we can to mend a world so ravaged by hatred and indifference that it seems to have forgotten that we are all called beloved children of God. We are to speak kindness and love to ourselves and to all those around us. We are to seek justice and mercy for all God’s creation, whenever and however we can. In baptism we are made worthy of serving as disciples. As followers of Jesus the good news is that there is nothing, no barrier, no division, no hatred, no indifference, nothing in all creation that can separate you from the abiding and everlasting love of God. And through baptism, we serve a world made worthy by God in Christ Jesus, to be transformed every moment of every day. It is this baptism we offer and witness.

Today when we recall the baptism of Jesus, we too are promising to remember who we are and whose we are and that the waters of baptism will hold us as we hear the words: You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. We all need that recognition and we all need that affirmation. Because when we do we can find the

confidence to be the whole person God has created us to be in body, mind and soul. Say it over and over again. You are my child, the beloved and with you I am well pleased. Amen.