

## **“I love you!”**

“Stranger than Fiction” is a movie, a love story which I delight in watching. A man falls hopelessly in love. He attempts to court the object of his affection. He is a tax-evasion analyst, dull and mechanical. He learns to play a guitar and learns one song. A love song. The woman he adores dislikes everything he stands for and shuns him. But when he is completely vulnerable, trying to play her this love song, “I’d go the whole wide world”, she melts and accepts and delights in his love.

It is a lovely moment. It portrays how a heart is melted, changed by hearing a declaration of love.

Can you remember when someone first told you that they loved you?

I remember the first time a girl held my hand in high school. I am sure I was floating above the ground!

The power of being loved is, I think, matched by nothing else.

In the story of the Baptism of Jesus, the thing that stands out for me is what God says to Jesus. “You are my son, the one I love. I am so well pleased with you!” This happens in words. In action Jesus comes up out of the waters. In Spirit, dove-like, God’s presence sweeps down on him.

I think this is Jesus falling in love with God as he hears God’s declaration of love for him.

By this I don’t mean Jesus didn’t love God before or vice versa.

Love isn’t a static thing, like a contract.

It is dynamic, living, tidal, revealing, deepening, costly and demanding.

It is unfolding like the chapters of a book or the scenes of a movie.

Love can be forgotten. And it can be re-found and remembered.

Love is like a flame, needing to be tended, sheltered and sometimes it burns your house down.

This is how we are with God.

We never *have God* in our hands, in a contract, or in perpetuity.

So the Baptism of Jesus is the moment when his relationship with God kicks up to another whole level.

The opened heavens, the beat and breath of the dove’s wings are the divine kiss.

They are the opening of his heart and the beat of his pulse.

The rising up out of the water is Jesus seeing the world made new and washed by the wonder of God’s love and the magnificence of his presence.

It is the un-noticed dullness of the world suddenly, stunningly illuminated by love.

The story of the baptism of Jesus is really the beginning of the Gospel. The infancy stories are prequels pointing out what we already know once we find Jesus, or are found by him.

The baptism, this heart and soul and life changing moment, this is when Jesus begins his ministry.

His whole life from now on is defined by the foundation of this moment.

His foundation, the rock on which he is built, is that he is loved.

Jesus is loved by God.

He is loved, not because he has done great things, or is smart, or good-looking. Not because he has earned or deserved it, just because God actually, intentionally, and indestructibly loves him.

(Isaiah says; Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him )

For me this story matters, and what I see in it is personal.

It matters because it is the part of the story of Jesus that helps me understand my own story.

My own early friendship for God was overwhelmed when I experienced God's love for me in the person of Jesus. I was in the church and knew myself loved by God and by the community, but it was the sudden, earth shifting, profoundly real, real-er than anything in science, deep knowing of love that opened my eyes to the newly illuminated world. It was the voice inside the silence of my soul that echoed into every corner saying, "David, you are loved" which melted my heart and made me float, and re-ordered every aspect of my life.

I understand, increasingly, as I go on in following this God who loves me, that I am called, not so much to be an evangelist, or a missionary, nor a social activist or a great teacher. I am called to love.

To love is particular. You love someone who is in front of you. I cannot love in abstract, or in theory. Not even in orthodox theology. Love is done with the eyes as much as the heart, it seems to me. So that is *my* calling, as the other bits and pieces seem to grow papery and peel away. The baptism of Jesus story helps me know this, slowly, more and more profoundly.

So I invite you to ponder this story on your own. I invite you to put yourself there in Jesus, rising up out of the water. I encourage you to imagine the voice in your head, and the rush of newly spoken love running through you (like sparks through the stubble, as scripture somewhere says). Let your own life help you imagine and join with Jesus in this instant, and so let Jesus join with you, with God's declaration of love. "I love you! I am so pleased with you!"