

Matthew 3:13-17
First Sunday after the Epiphany
January 11, 2026
The Rev. Katherine Bush

It can be really hard to have a body in this world. So many ways for this vulnerable bag of skin and bones to break or break down. And if it's not just our own fallibility and weakness, there's also the threat of harm from outside of us. Our soft, squishy bodies seem no match for this bruising world. It's like a design flaw that we get hurt so easily, that we're so exposed. I mean, couldn't we have come with impenetrable shells? Might we have been built to withstand more? The stories of people being rushed to the hospital, or the slower years-long collapse. The videos of shootings and the far-off images of violence. And all of us, just walking around with nothing shielding us from even the minor scrapes and scratches of daily life. It can be really hard to have a body in the world.

It's one more reason that it's astonishing, just astonishing, that God had a body in this world. Rather than remain impervious to the everyday dangers of walking around and tripping down the stairs, much less the state-sanctioned violence that would attempt to crush him, rather than avoid all that injury and damage, God walked around in a soft, unguarded body. Astonishing. It can be hard to have a body in the world, and Jesus did not don some protective armor to protect his. On the contrary, Jesus came in that riskiest of all manners: as a baby, an insubstantial infant dependent on others even to hold his head up, and in a time and place without any creature comforts or simple securities. If you ask me, it's almost ridiculous how at risk he was - just like we all are.

We've leapt ahead, though now, from that infancy story - just a week ago the magi were offering him gifts and also trying their best to protect him from the already present dangers of a mad and petty tyrant. And today, Jesus is grown, a man, getting ready to start up the whole show of teachings and miracles and healings. But first, he brings his body to the side of the river and meets up with John. After a little misunderstanding is ironed out, John and Jesus wade out into the water, and Jesus submerges into the river. His body is washed, and as he comes up out of the water, a dove alights, and those beautiful words float like a banner waving across the sky, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

This is how the big story begins. There are no tanks rolling in or megaphones broadcasting his arrival. No one knights him and hands him a sword to carry; he doesn't shoulder into a jacket adorned with pins and flags and royal insignia. He isn't given a phalanx of bodyguards to shuffle him around from appearance to appearance. No, it's actually all quite gentle really, gentle as a dove touching down. Do you get the sense of that? He and a friend slip their bodies into the water, come up clean and wet, and suddenly he knows - and we onlookers also seem to understand - that he is beloved. The water surrounds his body, embraces him, releases him, and that's the moment.

There's actually been a lot of gentleness, tenderness even, all morning in our stories. Did you notice? That servant, the one in whom the soul of God delights, will not lift up his voice to make it heard in the street; he won't even break an already bruised reed, nor will a flickering wick gutter out as he passes. That delighting, beloved God will take each one by the hand, like a parent or a partner or a friend grasping and squeezing your hand when you need to know you're not alone. There are stories of grandeur to be sure, but these soft moments are also part of the story. This softness, though, ought not be mistaken for weakness - not soft in the manner of cowardice or caving. That

servant and that God will open the eyes of the blind, bring prisoners out from their dungeons, will not faint or be crushed by the task of heralding justice.

And another little glimpse of this milder, quieter way of being in the world, so fleeting you'd almost miss it as Peter glides us through his summary of Jesus's life and what it means. After the violent death, his body strung up and brutalized, Jesus returned not to seek vengeance for how he was hurt, not to hunt down and hurt his enemies, but to eat and drink with his friends - that's it, that's what he does with his mighty resurrection power. Because a body, apparently even a resurrected body, craves the sustenance of a meal and the companionship of friends. Because a beloved body wants to love.

It's really hard to have a body in the world. The temptation is to armor up. How many times and in how many ways are we told to toughen up, to grow a thick skin, to steel ourselves even? But we see another way of walking around this perilous world when we watch how Jesus walked through it. His way of being a person in the world is echoed by Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax: strong back, soft front. There's no doubt, after all, what Jesus stands for - justice, forgiveness, mercy. And there's no doubt who Jesus stands for - the poor, the sick, the broken-hearted, the persecuted, the least of these. And the way that Jesus stood up with these people and for these principles was to walk slowly through the countryside telling stories, touching people who weren't supposed to be touched, and ultimately putting his soft body in the way of the brutal machinery of all that stood against him. A human body standing in front of an army of soldiers sent by the politicians. Strong back, soft front. He could do all this without a shield of armor, perhaps because he wore his belovedness as a shield against all the world would throw at him. Knowing, of course, that his belovedness didn't keep him safe or unscathed, it wasn't meant to, in fact, that belovedness may have made everything even more dangerous as he walked, exposed, toward the cross.

It's hard to have a body in this world. We see every day how risky it is just to go about our daily lives, and even more so how hazardous it is to put our fragile bodies on the line for what we believe in. But our bodies are what we have, tender, beloved. Each week in our Rite I prayers, we say that we "offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls *and bodies*." That's what we have to offer, to God and to this world: these flimsy, sometimes awkward, easily damaged, imperfect bodies. Astonishing that God showed up in one of these scruffy, flawed frames. Astonishing that a body is all we get to carry us through this perilous world. And also astonishing that our bodies are enough on their own to be beloved.

Our bodies will be put to the test in a thousand different ways, each of us with our unique collection of skin and bone and soul and mind will face different challenges, illness, pain, violence. Some of us will be asked to put our very bodies on the line, to protect someone, to protect an idea. Some of us will carry another body inside our own or in our arms. These bodies seem like they're inadequate to the task, yet a body is enough for God. Turns out that God believes a gentle, soft body is a perfect and sufficient way to be in the world, even in a world more accustomed to the bravado and brittle show of force. And for all that a body may endure, our bodies are also the places where we feel the warmth of a hand reaching over to squeeze ours, the sustenance of a meal, maybe with a belly laugh, the rinse of water cleansing us anew. It may be hard to have a body in the world, and still, our bodies - your body, mine, this is where our belovedness begins.