

First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord—Year C

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

We have *prepared* for **the coming of Christ**. We have moved through *labor* and *celebrated the birth of the Word made flesh*, *marveled* that we are *forever changed* by this **infusion of divinity into our flesh**. And **last Sunday**, on the **Feast of the Epiphany**, we saw how this good news isn't just good news for us, but is **good news for all people**.

Today, we move into *unpacking* what all of this really means in **tangible, concrete, in-the-flesh** kind of ways, and it *gets real* when we talk about **baptism**. Listen up because this is a **good news/bad news** kind of deal. The **good news** first.

We start from a place of **absolute security**. This *isn't* about anything we've done *or* not done, will do *or* won't do. No, **baptism is about identity**; it's about **who you are at the most fundamental level**, and both the lesson from **Isaiah** and **Luke's gospel** are crystal clear about that.

Hear **Isaiah's proclamation** again: **"Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel...I have called you by name, you are mine...You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."**

And that wondrous **declaration** we hear in **Luke**: **When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, a peace so tangible, so real, that you could feel it on your skin. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."**

*God created you. God formed you. God has called you by name. You are God's. You are precious in God's sight, and honored, and God loves you. You are God's son; you are beloved; with you God is well pleased. THIS IS WHO YOU ARE. THIS IS WHO WE ALL ARE. Period. This is not up for negotiation. This is given. This is your core, foundational identity, forever and always. This can't be undone, ever.*

That is an **infinitely secure place** from which to deal with the **bad news**. This **baptism with Jesus baptizes us—it's with the Holy Spirit and fire**. And **Jesus' chosen tool—a winnowing fork**. This **baptism** launches us into a life where **Jesus is forever combing us through, gathering in the good and lifegiving grain** that *feeds us and the world*, and **separating out** all that **chaff** that that *doesn't serve our soul or anybody else's*. *All those pieces that get in our way, and weigh us down, well they've got to get burned away*. Sometimes, **the Holy Spirit comes as that tangible peace in bodily form like a dove**, and sometimes, it comes to us as **the unquenchable fire that clears out the chaff** because **chaff doesn't feed us—it might look like food, but it's not; it can't sustain us**. Sometimes, **the Holy Spirit comes to us a refining fire that purifies us**, so that **our light burns brighter, our sight grows clearer, and our lives mirror more closely our Lord's**.

But **sorting out the wheat from the chaff** that lives within all of us, it's an **uncomfortable process; even when we need to lose the chaff, sorting out what's chaff and what's wheat, it frankly hurts**.

I wish it weren't so, but *being raised into the full stature of Christ, well, there's always going to be some dying involved*. It's good to know that on the front-end. **That's bad news part 1. Living in resurrection life will always involve dying.**

**Bad news part 2. *Being created, formed, claimed, honored, precious, and loved by God will not keep hard things from coming to you in this life.***

Amidst all those wonderful core identity things that **Isaiah** tells us about **God and us**, **Isaiah** also tells us this: **“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you...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. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east and from the west I will gather you.”** *So declares the prophet.*

Things are still going to come at us in a **torrent**, and **flood us**, and **knock us down**; **fires and trials** will **present themselves in front of us**; there's just *no escaping them*, but **God** tells us **unequivocally, DO NOT FEAR**, for **God has redeemed us**; **God already has laid divine hands on us, claimed us as God's own, and God's not letting go**. **God has already declared that God is our Savior**; **God is the one who will go to hell and back, literally, to make us whole**. According to the prophet, no matter how lost we get, or how lost our children get, no matter how deep in exile we feel ourselves to be, **WE NEED NOT FEAR**. **God is with us. God will gather up and bring home the lost, even if it takes all of eternity to do so.**

So, here's the deal, **in baptism, we mark ritually the truth of the Incarnation**; we are **literally knit into Christ's body**. *Even though it will take us the rest of your days to unpack it*, in **baptism**, we bring to **conscious awareness this holy covenant that God has made with all of us—you are God's beloved—this is your TRUE SELF**.

*And, this won't keep hard, tragic things from happening*, but you are **absolutely assured** that *when those things come, you will never, ever have to face them alone; you will never have to live afraid; you will never have to fear that you are beyond the reach of God's embrace*. That *doesn't mean that you won't feel forsaken sometimes, you will, but even then, Jesus will have gone even to that desolate place before you, so you won't be alone, even there*.

In **baptism**, the **Holy Spirit weaves us into a way of life that we will figure out how to live together**. **Begun and ended in wholeness, travelled in fits and starts and detours as we discover ever deeper levels of God's love and wholeness**. That's why we **don't ever just need a Savior, but we also need a Lord**. *We need someone to follow along the way; Jesus is a faithful guide and an even better travelling companion.*

And the **baptismal vows**—they are **guideposts** along the way.

They *remind us* that we need the **wisdom of the saints and community**, we need this **holy meal** that **feeds our deepest hunger**, we need to **rest at God's breast drinking in that love and grace and truth** that **John** so beautifully describes in the **prologue to his gospel**.

These **vows remind us** that **evil is alive and well and real** in this world and **resisting it takes perseverance**. We **won't do it perfectly**; we own that on the front-end, thank God, and **when we blow it, we can own it, and return to the Lord**.

In a world fixated on bad news, we are called to proclaim all the good news that God has revealed in Christ, like starting with telling everyone, through our words and our deeds, they are God's beloved and in them God is well-pleased.

Amidst a world that is increasingly tribal, that seeks to divide everything into "us" and "them"—there is a huge guidepost that reminds that the Word was made flesh, and therefore, all flesh is holy—we are to seek Christ in all people. And, that command to "love your neighbor as yourself"—that is some kind of radical—our neighbor cannot be severed from our very own self. Kind of shows any notion of "us" and "them" as the house of cards that it is, eh?

And the final guidepost, which we never, ever finish working on in this life, that call to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being, every human being. Which human beings? Every human being. Brutal for us sheep that so want to consign others to the goats.

All of these guideposts help us make our way as we follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It's the ride of a lifetime. On this Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, we celebrate that there's no escaping the love of God that claims us on this day, and day by day, together, we'll make our way, steeped in this love, as we grow into the full stature of Christ. Amen.

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