

Sunday, January 9, 2022 – “My Child, Always”

– Bible Study & Reflection on Isaiah 43:1-7 & Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passages from Isaiah 43:1-7 & Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

Isaiah 43:1-7

¹But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
²When 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.
³For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia^[a] and Seba in exchange for you.
⁴Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
⁵Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
⁶I will say to the north, “Give them up,”
and to the south, “Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
⁷everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Every year, the baptism of Jesus invites congregations to remember their baptisms and to reflect upon the basic Christian truth that our discipleship is not a matter of our virtue or accomplishment but rather due to God’s vocation, God’s calling, God’s mission and purposes in our world. All the Gospels open with John the Baptist, the forerunner who points the way toward the advent of Jesus. Luke’s depiction of John is as a wild-eyed, end-times prophet who

preaches that a cataclysmic apocalypse shall occur when this fallen world will end, and God's long-promised reality shall be initiated, a Realm of love, peace, and justice.

The coming of the Messiah is so demanding and momentous, but people must be prepared for the coming of his realm. The Messiah, his identity and work, will be so against the grain of our messianic expectations, that people must prepare by changing hearts and lives and then by being baptized, washed for the forgiveness of sins. People chose to come out to the Jordan River and hear John preach. But nobody chose to be encountered by a messiah like Jesus the Christ. Repentance means turning aside from the old age and its evil ways and turning towards the coming new age. We may come to Jesus as we are "without one plea" (to coin the phrase from the old hymn, "Just As I Am"). But Jesus never leaves us just as we are, trapped in an old age that never challenges us to change, to welcome God's new age. Dramatic, bodily change is required. That's what John the Baptist was preaching out in the wilderness.

Jesus will initiate the dramatic change through baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. The Messiah's work is also to carry out a final judgment, separating the wheat from the chaff. Thus John is not depicting repentance so much as a human action but rather as a modest human response to God's action. The Messiah will actively change and transform.

When Jesus shows up to be baptized, his bodily presence is a sign that God's Realm is breaking in now. The voice from heaven makes explicit identification of Jesus as God's Son, the One in whom God is well pleased. It's as if God is saying in Jesus' baptism, "You are my child, always." Interestingly, in our First Scripture Reading from Isaiah 43, Isaiah the prophet characterizes Israel as God's cherished child, the one in whom God has called by name and the one whom God promises always to preserve and defend. Why would God do such a thing? Isaiah 42:1-4 speaks of Israel as a chosen servant for God's purpose of bringing justice to all the nations, that is, to the Gentiles. Just as God has called Israel to be God's servant, God now calls Jesus to take up God's mission in the world.

There is a heavenly voice, and the Holy Spirit descends. It says that heaven is breaking open and the voice of God, known only indirectly through scripture and the words of the prophets of God, has now become explicit and unmistakable. Bystanders can actually see the Holy Spirit.

It's as if at Jesus' baptism, a baptism performed by the preacher John the Baptist is taken over by the Holy Spirit who settles upon the body of Jesus, designating him explicitly as the One in whom God delights. Just as God chose Israel to be God's servant people, God now chooses Jesus, through the sign of his baptism, to carry God's reign "bodily" into the world.

And so, with the voice of the sign, the baptism of Jesus becomes a story of vocation, of calling. From heaven, a voice calls out proclaiming the identity of Jesus: this is God's Son. It is a Christian claim that, in some degree, every baptism is a public pronouncement of vocation. When we are baptized, the Church voices the claim that the person being baptized is being adopted, called, commissioned as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Baptism says to me that our being followers of the Way of Jesus is never our doing. Our being disciples of Jesus was his idea before it was ours. In our times of doubt, when we have misgivings about our ability to be faithful disciples of Jesus, it is a great comfort to remember

that we have been baptized, that we belong to God, that God says to us, “You are my child, always” because somehow, someway, the Holy Spirit has worked that miracle in us.

Blessings Upon You Beloved Children of God,

Pastor Greg Rupright