

**REMEMBERING OUR BAPTISMS**  
**LUKE 3: 15-17, 21-22; ISAIAH 43: 1-7**  
**THE LORD'S BAPTISM SUNDAY**  
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**JANUARY 10, 2010**

**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."*

Our Old Testament passage comes from the Book of Isaiah. Although there are many ways to characterize the message of our scripture reading for this morning, some say that our gospel passage calls Jesus into his vocational ministry and our passage from Isaiah is part of Israel's commissioning as the chosen people.

We are chosen and called, too, not because we are better than others, but because God has plans for us in order to bless all people. This was true for Abraham and Sarah, for Israel, for Jesus Christ, and for you and me.

In our baptisms and throughout our lives, we are called to service in Christ's name. So let us listen for God's Word to each of us, right here, right now. May we hear the Living Word by the power of the Holy Spirit through **Isaiah 43: 1-7**.

*But 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.*

*2 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. 3 For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. 4 Because 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. 5 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 6 I 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--7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."*

Thanks be to God for this Holy Word. Please pray with me. Holy and eternal God, we give thanks that you have called us and claimed us as your own. We give thanks that you promise to walk with us and save us. Lord, some of us feel overwhelmed at times. Some of us feel overwhelmed right now. Help us remember your promise to be with us. Inspire us by your Spirit so that we feel your love and your presence. Help us remember the promise of our baptisms in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Many years ago, a baby born in England, Lucille by name, was taken by her maternal grandmother to her local Wesleyan chapel to be baptized (Stookey, Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church, 11-12). Lucy's father, a faithful Anglican, was skeptical of his mother-in-law's action because the Church of England did not recognize Methodist clergy as being in the apostolic succession. So Lucy's father took her to his Anglican parish church where she was baptized again.

Now Lucy's mother was a convert to the Salvation Army and didn't think much of either the Wesleyans or the Anglicans. So she took Lucy to the local citadel for presentation under the banner of blood and fire – the Salvationist counterpart to baptism.

In time the family emigrated to the Midwestern United States. The community in which they lived had neither an Episcopal Church nor an Army Citadel; so the family attended the Methodist Church. As a teenager, Lucy joined a class of those preparing to take the vows required for church membership. The pastor at the Methodist church was one of those mavericks who disapproved of his denomination's baptism of infants. He wanted all those in the class to be "truly baptized" at the font on the day they made their vows. Lucy's mother discovered what was afoot and said, "Absolutely not. Three times is enough for anyone." But Lucy knew that once her mother was seated in church, she would not make a scene. Sure enough, when the rest of the group went to the font, so did Lucy!

Now it came to pass that some years later Lucy fell in love with and married a Southern Baptist – but not without extracting from him a pledge that she need not be baptized yet again. He agreed that she was quite sufficiently initiated into the church, and all was well – until they moved to a community where they attended a Baptist Church that was in need of a pianist. Lucy loved to play. It seemed that her arrival was a providential gift to the congregation. But the deacons ruled that unimmersed hands should not play the Lord's songs, at least not for their congregation. And so, for a fifth time, Lucy was baptized, this time by immersion.

Perhaps Lucy's experience is unique, but it points to very real differences in the ways Christians regard baptism. Sometimes the focus on our differences keep us from appreciating the meaning of baptism. Does the amount of water or the qualifications of the administrator make a difference in the effectiveness of a baptism? Are infants appropriately baptized, or should only those old enough to make a particular statement of belief be baptized? And what words should be included in the statement? Should one church or denomination accept the baptisms of other churches? On what grounds and by what criteria? Do we need to be baptized more than once? Is baptism primarily a sign of God's grace, the faith of the believer or both?

These are only some of the questions raised about baptism. If you are interested in discussing these issues, I encourage you to attend the class Rev. Larry Stewart will lead about baptism soon during the Discipleship Hour. I will be happy to discuss these issues with you individually. There is information about baptism available in our narthex, in our library and in my office. Baptism is important. Men and women of good faith sometimes disagree about baptism. We learn from each other, especially when we gather around the Word and open ourselves to the teaching of the Spirit.

Although we respect the differing views Christians may have, Presbyterians believe that our baptisms are a sign and seal of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. We believe our baptisms reflect what God has already accomplished in Jesus Christ. Presbyterians emphasize the act of God's grace in our baptism, but we also recognize the gift of faith to the believer, as well as the response God expects from those who are baptized.

Although Presbyterians baptize infants, sometimes referencing Acts 2:39, *This promise is for you and for your children*, we require that parents make the baptismal vows on behalf of the child. We insist that the parents or guardians, as well as the congregation, promise to rear children in the faith so that the day comes when they make their own professions of faith. Nurturing children and adults in the faith is the business of the whole church. It is our God-given responsibility. We always have more to learn. Baptism marks the beginning of new life in Christ. Baptism is not a certification that we know it all.

Presbyterians accept the baptism of other churches as long as the baptism is performed by a person set aside for that purpose and the baptism is conducted in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We do not believe a person needs to be baptized more than once, though we admit we are all sinners in need of grace. God's power is more than sufficient. Today we will remember the Baptism of our Lord and our own baptisms by repeating baptismal vows, but God's saving grace needs no renewal or redo.

Presbyterians do not believe that the amount of water is important because water, like baptism itself, is a sign of what God has already done. Although we agree that immersion into the waters of God's grace or feeling God's grace poured over us until we are saturated are powerful symbols, Presbyterians also believe that the water does not save us, nor does our recitation of particular words. It is God's love in Jesus Christ that saves us through faith.

Presbyterians believe that baptism, through the power of the Holy Spirit, unites us with Jesus Christ and with other believers into the body of Christ. *We become one in Christ (Galatians 3:28)*. In our baptisms we are assured of the forgiveness of our sins. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit forever. In our baptisms we are called into service for our Lord and Savior. *We are clothed with Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:27)*.

When we remember our baptisms and the baptism of Jesus Christ, we remember the incredible love of God who took on our humanness so that we might understand our potential by the grace of God. Jesus was willing to take on our sins, even unto death, though he was without sin.

In the baptism of our Lord, God showed the powerful love of God as a father to whom his son is precious and loved. Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor credits her grandmother with teaching her about what it means to be precious (Susan Andrews, *Lectionary Homiletics*, 1/7/01, 7). When she stayed with her grandmother, each day ended with a luxurious bobble bath and cleansing with a big sponge. After she was dried with a large soft towel, her grandmother rubbed her down with Jergen's lotion. She told her that God loved each little toe and each little finger. Her grandmother provided the perfect ending with a pale blue powder puff covered with Evening in Paris dusting powder. "When Grandma was done, I knew I was precious." When we remember our baptisms, I hope we grasp down to our toes and fingers how precious we are to God. We are cleansed of sin, wrapped in love and dusted with grace.

*I have called you by name, you are mine*. When we remember the Lord's baptism, I hope we remember that we were called by name, called by our first name, in our baptisms. One minister thought remembering a baptism might get him out of an embarrassing predicament (Susan Andrews, *Lectionary Homiletics*, 1/7/01, 7). He was ready to perform a couple's wedding vows, but all at once he could not think of the groom's first name. "By what name were you baptized?" the minister asked. The groom thought for a few seconds and responded, "I was baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." His answer did not help the minister, but it was theologically correct. When we remember our baptisms, I hope we remember that God knows us intimately, by our first name, and God loves us deeply.

Although John the Baptist preached about a God of fire and judgment, God descended as a dove during the baptism of our Lord. When we remember our baptisms, we remember the gentle love of the Holy Spirit who is with us forever.

We also remember God as a Father who will never let go. One little boy in South Florida learned about a father's love the hard way (Homiletics, 1/10/2010, 19). On a hot summer day he decided to go swimming in the lake behind his home, not realizing there was an alligator nearby. The boy's father, working in the yard, saw the alligator and screamed to his son as he rushed toward the lake. Just as the little boy reached his father's hands, the alligator grabbed boy's legs. The alligator was strong, but the father would not let go.

A farmer nearby heard the screams and saw what was happening. He grabbed a shotgun and ran toward the water. He shot and killed the alligator, but not before the boy was severely injured. The little boy recovered remarkably well, though his legs were permanently scarred.

A newspaper reporter visited the little boy in the hospital and asked to see the scars. The boy lifted his pant legs. Then with pride, he told the reporter, "But look at my arms. I have scars on my arms, too. I have them because my dad would not let go." My friends, we are baptized in the name of a God who will not let go.

When we remember the baptism of our Lord, we remember the trials and suffering Jesus faced. The God who promised to be with Israel, the God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ and promises to be with us always, does not promise a life without challenges and suffering. When we pass through the waters, God will be with us; but we will pass through the waters – and those waters may be knee deep in alligators. When we walk through fire, God promises that we will not be burned; but we will still walk through fire. Whenever his life was filled with doubts, fears or temptations, Martin Luther repeated the phrase, "I have been baptized." Maybe we need to remember our baptisms more often.

When we remember the baptism of Jesus, we remember his faithfulness, his love, his courage and his sacrifice. If we are clothed with Christ in our baptisms, we are called to serve the God who loves us. We are called to serve every single day faithfully and with courage. We are called to seek justice and to love righteousness. Whether we are young or not so young, whether we are in school, at work, at home or in the community, we are baptized for service.

When we remember our Lord's baptism, we also remember his death and resurrection. In Romans 6:8, the Apostle Paul said that we are baptized into the death of Christ so that we might also have new life in him. Jesus was baptized into our humanity so that we might be baptized into his divinity (Susan Andrews, Lectionary Homiletics, 1/7/01, 7). When we remember our baptisms, we remember that death is not the end.

When we remember the baptism of Jesus and our own baptisms, we remember that Jesus commissioned us to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them all that Jesus has taught us (Matthew 28:20). This is our mission as baptized believers, as the body of Christ in this time and place. We are blessed in our baptisms so that we might be a blessing to others. Amen.