

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Baptism of Our Lord

January 12, 2020

Scriptures
Isaiah 43:1-7
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Through the Waters

The heavens open. The Spirit descends.

Jesus emerges from the water.

And a voice echoes through the blue expanse.

"This is my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased."

Jesus is named. Claimed.

We come to the water. We remember we are named. Claimed.

Can it be so? What a thing to be named. Claimed.

We come to worship the one who names and claims us still.

The passage from Isaiah really struck me this week as I read it so I want to invite you to sit back and hear it again - really hear it in a couple of versions.

Sit comfortably, take a deep breath, close your eyes put yourself in a posture of meditation or prayer and let the words pour over you like water pouring over you.

‘But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, . . . : 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. . . .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.” (Isaiah 43:1-7 NRSV)

Hear it again

Isaiah 43:1-7 The Message (MSG)

When You’re Between a Rock and a Hard Place

43

1-4 But now, God’s Message,

the God who made you in the first place, . . .

the One who got you started, . . .

“Don’t be afraid, I’ve redeemed you.
I’ve called your name. You’re mine.
When you’re in over your head, I’ll be there with you.
When you’re in rough waters, you will not go down.
When you’re between a rock and a hard place,
it won’t be a dead end—
Because I am God, your personal God,
The Holy of Israel, your Savior...
“So don’t be afraid: I’m with you.
I’ll round up all your scattered children,
pull them in from east and west.
I’ll send orders north and south:
‘Send them back.
Return my sons from distant lands,
my daughters from faraway places.
I want them back, every last one who bears my name,
every man, woman, and child
Whom I created for my glory,
yes, personally formed and made each one.’”

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.

I found these words powerful this week. I know what it is to be in the waters and feel like I am drowning. A long time ago I used to love to scuba dive. One night on a deep water night training dive I lost sight of my buddies. It was my fault I was the last one down and I let go of the rope when I thought I was close to the bottom but I must not have been. I was deep it was dark I couldn’t see anything but dark ocean water with glistening algae. 🙌 I don’t know if you have had that experience but it looks something like this.

I had a brief moment of panic as I looked for my group and when I couldn’t find them I also realized I didn’t know which way was up. I was in the vast deep dark waters and I was overwhelmed and it started to consume me. Fortunately I was well trained and I quickly came to my senses and stopped moving and saw which way my air bubbles went. I was fortunate that I stayed calm and I remembered the rules and I made it to the surface without anything more than a racing heart rate. Most of us know what it is to feel overwhelmed to feel like we are about to drown at least metaphorically. Many of us have things going on in our lives today that might make us feel that way and so I wonder if the images we often see of the baptism of Christ actually represent what they should. 🙌 Jesus standing in gently rippling water - sometimes up to his waist, other times only ankle deep. John stands beside him pouring a gentle stream of water onto Jesus' head, often from a scallop shell. The waters of baptism as related in the text (Luke 3:15-22) are carefully controlled by the artist so as to not detract from either the Savior or

his fur-clad cousin. It's a far cry from a situation that would lead God to promise that "when you go through the waters I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you" (Isaiah 43:1-7). It's hard to imagine that God would need to promise to be with anyone in ankle-deep water. But the path through those waters of baptism led to the cross and Jesus' anguished cry that God was nowhere to be found.

As artists have managed their images, perhaps we in Christ's church have managed baptism to the point that its waters no longer seem even dangerous enough to warrant our careful attention. We use a careful dribble of water or step down smooth-surfaced steps into a carefully filled pool. And we believe these tidy, manageable actions symbolize our being named as Christ's own and grafted into the body of Christ. I have a baptism moment that is coming to my mind over and over these days. One beautiful afternoon I stood in the Jordon river and had a rededication on my baptismal vows and I have to tell you what was most powerful was that while we a group of Christians on pilgrimage from North Vancouver did this sacred act a soldier with a machine gun stood over us. I wish I had had the time to pull that photo out of the archives. But here is a photo of the place I remember. Just picture a soldier standing there just above the steps and us in the water below. On that day he was doing his duty and it was a reminder of what was going on in the world but we felt pretty safe. With events of the world of this week I imagine those machine gunned soldiers wouldn't let us wade into those sacred waters and I imagine every soldier is on high alert. Our world is bracing for rough waters.

Annie Dillard wrote about worship: "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."¹

I don't know that we do get it that we do hear the message being said to us in these passages most days but I want to try. I want to trust that these scriptures that I carry in my heart that I hold dear really speak truth that God is more powerful than the raging waters of life that overwhelm us, that God will quench the flame of fear and put joy in our hearts. That somehow in this world that looks so out of control love and hope and grace are still stronger.

This baptismal story is a story about naming and claiming and it is a story for us because that is what the moment of our baptism is to be for us.

David Lose wrote

Yes, Baptism is about forgiveness. But forgiveness is not a mechanism but rather is a gift. We aren't forgiven in Baptism in order that God can call us God's children, but rather we are forgiven because we already are God's children. So, yes, baptism is about forgiveness. But it's also about so much more! It's about love, identify, affirmation, commitment, promise, and still

¹ [Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.]

more. In fact, I'd argue that Baptism is first about all these other things and then, as by-product and gift, about forgiveness. That is, in Baptism God proclaims God's great love for us; calls, names, and claims us as God's beloved children; gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit;...and then, because of God's love for us, God also promises to forgive, renew, and restore us at all times. In his baptism Jesus is named and claimed as God's beloved child and so it is Jesus in our baptism claims us. Jesus hears God say these unbelievably important words of love, affirmation and identity: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the incredible, shocking, unexpected, and even scandalous thing is that in our Baptism, we hear the same thing: "You are my child, my beloved, and with you I am well pleased."

Athanasius, my favorite theologian of the early church, put it this way: Jesus became one of us – scandalous! – so that we might become like him – even more scandalous yet!²

The essential theme in Luke is Jesus sees those no one else does -- the widow of Nain. Zacchaeus up in a tree. Jesus tells stories of persons whose goodness is defined by coming near and seeing those whom most refuse to see, the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan, who is never called "good" in the parable by the way, is first good because he draws near and truly sees the guy in the ditch. The priest and the Levite? They see, but do not see. They do not see for whom Jesus came. They are unwilling to see those whom they themselves have excluded from God's favor.

And that is where I am once again comforted because that means when I am in the waters overwhelmed and consumed with life Jesus sees me. And when you are overwhelmed and consumed and when you doubt and struggle you are seen.

I get why the symbol of water is used for a sacrament like baptism because water is powerful and it is frightening and it is beautiful and it is healing.

I sat with a friend this week and she told me the story of healing journey she is on. I have known her for about ten years now and she has been in a life battle that whole time, like many of us she has found herself stuck in a life situation she hasn't been able to figure her way out of yet. She said another friend of her kept telling her to listen to a pod cast to help motivate her. She said she listened for five minutes and she got the message. She has propelled herself on a forward moving journey she changed her practices of life but what she has found the most helpful in the last weeks has been a daily practice, she goes to hot yoga and then she goes to the pool and she started to tell me that somehow the sweat and the tears and the waters are healing her. She said the sweat pours out of me and then I go and I swim but I usually find myself after a brief swim just floating and I let the water carry me and I pray for the ability to let go of the things I am holding on to to stop holding so tight to things and allow myself to risk so that I can be free and I go to waters of the hot tub and the steam room and I sweat again and I go refresh myself in the shower and somehow these practices are healing me. I am discovering myself again. She told me that her mother told her years ago that she had lost herself and suddenly she hears her mothers voice even though she passed years ago and her name is being called and she is suddenly known again. She said its like my own baptism she giggled.

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/01/the-baptism-of-our-lord-c-forgiveness-and-so-much-more/>

That's it I said as shocked as she was - that is a baptism - I have no doubt that is what it is about (and I asked if I could share her story)

And so, I wonder, just like how much Jesus learned from his mother so as to preach his first sermon, how much Jesus needed to hear "you" so as to recognize who he needed to see. It's hard to pay attention to another when you have never had another pay attention to you.

Moreover, the remarkable thing about this "you" is that as soon as we hear it, according to Luke, we are called to see, to acknowledge, to come near, to free, any "you" who has not heard the good news of great joy. The "you" in Jesus' baptism reiterates the regard for Elizabeth, the regard for Mary. To hear "you" is to be regarded, to be favored by God. That's what "you" should feel like. And that "you" you are called to say, in Jesus' name, to others.

The Baptism of Our Lord Sunday can easily digress into sermons about proper baptismal beliefs and doctrines or expositions about the meaning of baptism devoid of any kind of Scriptural foundation. And so, how does Luke's interpretation of Jesus' baptism invite us to think about baptism in a specific way; in a way that might even look forward to what Jesus' baptism truly means for his ministry, and what it means, for anyone who chooses to follow Jesus?

Karoline Lewis shares a story of when she was a pastor. "I was pastor of a church outside of Atlanta, I ended up writing a dialogue sermon for Baptism of Our Lord Sunday because the church I served was a unique denominational blend, and yet was a Lutheran church. ... The dialogue sermon quoted and paraphrased much of Luther's Small Catechism so that my congregation would know that baptism is God's claim of "you."

Many years later, I "preached" this same sermon with my husband in south Minneapolis, full-blown Lutheran country. After the service, a long time member of the church, 90-year-old Dott (not her name), came up to me and said, "Karoline, is that really true?" "What?" I responded. "That GOD baptizes you?" "Well, yes. This is what we believe, Dott."

She then told me why she doubted the "you." Dott had a sister, born too early and not expected to live, about three years before Dott was even born. The only option was to bring her home for her two-to-three month lifespan. During that time, the grandmother baptized her. Then, when Dott's sister died, of course her parents set up a meeting with the pastor for the funeral. The pastor told them that he would do the funeral, but not in the sanctuary because he had not baptized the baby. The funeral was held in the basement of the church.

Dott then said to me, "Do you mean my sister is okay?" The sister she never met. The sister she had mourned for her entire 90 years. The sister for whom she wondered, "is God really for her?" Oh, yes. I said. The "you" your sister heard, God meant. And God did not, and will never, let her go.³

Baptism is of God sure you can come to me and I am happy to be a part of that sacrament in which we call on the holy spirit and we bless the child but lets be clear it is not me doing the blessing and it is not me making the decision if this child is a child of God - that is God's decision and my full belief is that God makes that decision before that God names, claims and calls us even before we are knit together in our mothers womb. And God says to every person no

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5273>

matter the baptismal status Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

I have called you by your name, you are mine;
I have gifted you and ask you now to shine.
I will not abandon you; all my promises are true.
You are gifted, called, and chosen; you are mine.

As we sing this hymn together I want to invite anyone of you who are willing to come forward and either have a blessing as you remember baptism or if you have not been baptized come forward and receive a blessing (if you have not been baptized I invite you to simply clap your hands when you come to me and I will not force a baptism on you) but I'd love to bless you as a beloved child of God.