

January 8, 2023  
“Called in Righteousness”

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Matthew 3:13-17

Well, I waited until the absolute last minute to take down our Christmas tree, cards, and sundry decorations that were perched along windowsills and shelves around the open space that is our kitchen, dining, and living area. Early each December I say hello to my snowperson collection that is a motley assortment created out of glass, wood, plastic, and candle. On January 6<sup>th</sup> of the new year I say goodbye, and pack them away until next time. Some of you probably have colour-coordinated and eminently sensible and matching Christmas decorations that grace your home with organized beauty. My offering is more chaotic, and while I no longer display the cut-out reindeers that each of my children shed blood over as a kindergarten project under the careful and exacting eye of Mrs. Purdon, I still say hello to them each year, give them a pat, and carefully lay them back in the tub that also houses a wreath ornament made out of dough and the cardboard cone festively decorated with macaroni and spray-painted gold. That macaroni is preserved for life and fared way better than the finger-painting project using chocolate pudding as its medium. The growth that tasty rendering accumulated over the years I kept it was quite remarkable. Perhaps it is now time to admit that my children were born in 1978 and 1981 respectively, giving you a hint as to how long I have been nurturing such treasures.

Which brings me back to the new year. It is 2023 and we have jumped right over the treasure of Epiphany and into the baptism of Jesus. In years past I have creatively addressed things by naming the nearest Sunday to January 6<sup>th</sup> as the “Sunday Closest to Epiphany.” I love the Nativity, but I have never felt I have done it quite right until the visit of the Magi enters the story in early January, bringing with it gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The Magi give

light and enlightenment to the Christmas story. Each year I cling to the bright possibility of God revealed anew, the magic of the star that stands still at exactly the right moment pointing to the miracle of new birth, and the light of God's love revealed in all its vulnerability, grace, and wonder. Indeed, the gifts of the Magi activate the full potential of Jesus' birth, death and life, and the resurrection of hope, possibility, and new life.

We bring this cycle of possibility and resurrection into the story of our own lives. I am two thirds through Richard Rohr's "The Universal Christ," and at the part where Rohr is challenging us to see it all—life, death, human suffering, God-with-us, and Divine Love in the image of the crucified Jesus. My instinctive "don't want to go there" is a push back from my more restrained and less adorned protestant upbringing. Rohr's arguments are compelling, however, and I am finding my way to viewing Christ on the cross in a new light. But that is at the opposite end of the spectrum from where we find ourselves this Sunday and the baptism of Jesus welling up as a beacon of justice and peace for a broken world, and with the persistence of his teachings, message, and mission, into ours. And what is there not to love about a baptism?

Baptism at any age is a call into righteousness. It is not a call from sin and into perfection worthy of salvation and eternal life. God's grace covers that. Rather, it is a call to reconcile with our down-to-earth humanity and strive for a way to embrace justice. It is not a call to priggish self-righteousness, something that Rohr pushes well against. It is a gift that informs possibility: self-determination paired with compassion, faith freely offered as radical love to overcome the challenge of suffering and injustice in our own lives and in the lives of others; a way to live fully in every moment of life, taking the sting out of death. With baptism comes the knowledge that reconciliation and renewal steer us along a right path, making words like hope, love, joy and peace the guiding lights to birth, rebirth, and resilient ministry.

Such assurance is discernable in the resilient words of Isaiah 42: “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.” Yes, the ancient words are often interpreted as pointing to Jesus, but with every baptism...the countless baptisms since the time of Isaiah through to Jesus’ own baptism...the numberless baptisms generation following generation through to the Post-Modern era...the light of the Spirit descending as a dove on innumerable human lives and turning them towards righteousness...through it all, we have the assurance of a universal enlightenment that projects endless possibility, opportunity, new life, renewed life, a beginning, an end, and a new beginning.

Two thousand years ago Jesus went into the Jordan Jewish and he came up out of the waters Jewish. Christianity did not enter into the picture until well after Jesus had died. Like every other baptism, Jesus’ baptism was a breakthrough, a revelation of and witness to a continuum of Divine intervention that steers humanity towards righteousness and invites a knowing of what is “fitting” for humanity and all creation. Baptism is a commitment to utilize our very lives to address and overcome all that pushes against the fullness of life and to do it with courage, kindness, openness, and justice-making, resistant to every evil that attempts to suppress the full flowering of the Divine creation. In Spirit, we can, in small and large ways, shed our worst selves to reveal our God-selves again and again. With God everything is possible.

Before she left, Rev. Karen pointed me in the direction of a resource called “Unsplash,” an on-line compilation of free photographs covering a limitless bounty of subjects. There I found the photograph of the hand coming up out of the water holding the lit sparkler. For me the picture is as ambiguous as the image of the tortured body of Jesus nailed to the cross. For me,

the hand holding the sparkler above the water represents a persistent desire to keep the flame high, dry, and burning bright. Imagine a synchronized swimmer using all their strength to kick from below, upswelling to take a life-preserving breath to then to sink and repeat in a joyous dance, all the while keeping the flame high and dry above the waterline. Such is the power of baptismal intent.

The antithesis, of course, is to sink, dousing the flame. We can imagine either/or. My gut suggests that we yearn, however, for the way of strength and persistence. We yearn to be as Jesus coming up out of the baptismal waters bearing the flame of justice, goodness, and mercy. And even if our imagination leads us to go under, science provides a counterpoint. The cosmology of the black hole reveals that even from the depths of utter darkness or despair the spark of new light and life is want to be born. Within us we have the power to become the body of Christ—a resurrection of a broken body taken from a cross, laid in a tomb, and brought to light and life again by the rolling away of every barrier on a star-lit pathway towards justice and peace. It is marvelous and a marvel, and we are gifted with a story, a baptism, and a history of faith to bring justice and peace to life.

In some ways, Christ Church Gabriola is at a point of ambiguity, and change has the tendency to breathe uncertainty. On December 25<sup>th</sup> you shared a last service with Rev. Karen. Two Sundays later we have hurdled Epiphany and are bearing witness to Jesus rising up out of the baptismal waters to embrace his new self. For the next few months it may feel at times as if we are madly paddling below water trying to keep the spark alive for a new minister. Holding us to course, however, is an amazing community bearing gifts of courage, goodwill, kindness, caring, mission, and purpose. The past five years of Karen's ministry has secured us in a vibrant ministry and a good sense of who we are and whose we are. With willingness, faith, and

commitment from all of us working as one, we have the wherewithal to hold the course and uphold the full potential of this community of faith that is Christ Church Gabriola. Already, the Implementation Team has received several exciting new proposals—sparks of potential grounded in possibility and hope. Our small, but mighty and emergent congregation has found its sea legs.

No doubt there will be moments in the months ahead when we feel as if we are treading water, but anchoring us to our current purpose is treasure from the past, the legacy of rich ministries, and the hard work of the past few years. Now is also presented as an opportunity to discern what we are clinging to that we need to let go of. Significantly, we have gifted ourselves with clarity of direction and a process for innovative action to bolster our resilience, stay the course, and live out our mission and God's vision. Christ Church Gabriola is well equipped to move forward with compassionate self-determination, faith aplenty to meet every challenge, and a story of birth and rebirth to keep the fire of this ministry aflame.

By now, Karen has been warmly welcomed by Comox United Church. By way of appointment, I am with you for the short-term, as is Rev. Deborah Vandergoes who is on board to take the fourth Sunday per month. The CCG search team is actively engaged in all that is required to call a new minister. And, all being well, in a few months this community of faith will be full bore in the excitement of its own open-armed and open-handed welcome. In the meantime, as God's beloved, let us all rise to the occasion. Let us keep the flame of God's love alive here on Gabriola, and let us be the just, kind, and merciful people God calls us to be in Christ's name. Quite simply, it is our call to righteousness. Amen.