

“With You I Am Well Pleased”

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**Sunday, January 10, 2016
Baptism of the Lord**

Readings from Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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. 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. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. 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. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 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--everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Isaiah 43:1-7

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. 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.”

Now when all the people were baptized, and 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. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Spirit. I pray that you would take the words, worries, images, concerns that are on our hearts, the words that we have heard and offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from sacred scripture and the words that you have placed upon my heart this morning to share, touch, bless and transform them all into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ, our Lord. And let that word do its work within us, among us and through us out into a hurting and broken world. We ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

Today in the life of the church we celebrate the baptism of Jesus Christ. We celebrate that time in his life where he was commissioned into ministry, where as a young man he joined with others at a river being baptized by John. We celebrate it because it was the inauguration of his ministry on earth, a ministry that led him to the cross and beyond death to eternal life. It is this act of his baptism as we celebrate it today and then later practice it today, where we remind ourselves and remember what it

means for God to give the gift of Jesus Christ. In Christmas we celebrate the coming of Christ as an infant where God and all of God's majesty lays that aside and brings to earth this child. And today we celebrate God again descending to earth in the form of a dove and that dove resting on Jesus. And then the voice from heaven saying, "You are my child, the Beloved, in you I am well pleased."

In our journeys in life we are often encouraged to climb the ladder of success, or to keep working our way up toward some place of victory or recognition or fulfillment. But what I want to remind us is that an equally important aspect of our Christian faith, heritage and identity is the way of descent. If God can descend to earth in the form of a child and the Holy Spirit can descend to earth in the form of a dove, maybe we, too, can be okay with the way of descent. Descent is not easy for us because often we think about it in times where there is conflict in our lives or struggle. As Parker Palmer says of people who just move up to the frozen north in Minnesota, "You know, the winters up here will drive you crazy unless you learn to get out and get into them." And what I want to do is invite us to think about those hard times in our lives as times when we don't need to run away from things, but maybe we need to embrace them, to be attentive to them, to be like Jesus in prayer and to allow God's spirit to speak to us and to remind us what happens in our baptism.

As ministers, Karen and I have the privilege of being with families and individuals in the hardest and worst moments of their lives. It is not easy to carry those remembrances within. Several people that I have ministered to in the past I carry within. A couple of them I have preached on. None of them have been a part of this congregation. But I have shared before about the privilege of baptizing a young girl named, Sudi Rae, the daughter of some friends of mine and my wife's in our church on Bainbridge Island. Sudi Rae was born after being only four months in her mother's womb. She did not survive her birth, but her parents wanted her baptized. And so I had the privilege of entering into a horrible time in their lives, taking their little daughter in my hand and baptizing her in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Hardly a day goes by when I don't think about her.

I also carry within me a young woman named Kristen. She like me went to college at Seattle University. She was several years behind me, maybe more than 15. But I had an affinity in the sense that she was there in school doing the things that I knew happened at Seattle U., having fun. She was a member of the congregation that I served and one day the phone rang and her roommate had found her unconscious on the floor of her dorm room. A brain aneurysm had erupted and took her young and promising life. I went to the hospital to be with her and her friends as they gathered and waited for her mother to arrive. And when she did I had the sacred privilege, horrible as it was, to introduce her mother to her child. It was not an easy time, but it was one of those moments where you come to realize that life is a gift. It is a gift to be shared and enjoyed and we truly do not know when that gift will be taken from us.

In the first church that I served, I remember being in conversation with a young woman. She was about 28 years old. She was married, the mother of two, had graduated from college, had a good job but something was unsettled in her soul. She came in and through a series of meetings I learned a little bit of her story. She had gotten pregnant before being married, between high school and college, but decided to get married to her child's father. They had another child. She went on to college and made good progress, especially in relationship to her peers, a lot of whom had not been able to put their lives together in that way. But as I said, there was something swirling inside of her. As we got closer and closer to that place, I remember asking her one time, I said, "Do you have a moment or remembrance that kind of captures this?" And she shared the story that she and her friends one night close to their graduation from high school had gone to a party in a neighboring town, had had a little too much

celebration and were driving home and the local sheriff pulled them over. In Pennsylvania in that area, everybody knows everybody so the sheriff knew all the kids, the kids knew the sheriff and every time before that the sheriff would have given them a warning and let them go. But I think this time, so close to graduation, and as a father himself, he was afraid and he wanted to wake these kids up. So he arrested all of them and took them to jail and called their parents. This young woman's parents came and picked her up, drove her home down a gravel driveway, parked the car and as she got out the back door, her father got out the front door. He turned around in the darkness, looked her in the eye and said to her, "I am so disappointed in you." And then she started to cry. She started to cry because, she said, this is what she thinks about herself and her identity and her worth. She hears her father say to her, "I am so disappointed in you."

I shudder to think of the things that we have said unaware, and how those things have been inscribed in the souls of those we love and care about most. What I want to offer to you today is that there is a place underneath all those scars. There is a place deeper in our souls where the etching has not been done by our words but by the words of God. And those words are ours through the act of baptism, because in baptism we are joined with the life of Jesus Christ, not just the ministry, death and resurrection to new life part, but that earliest part as well. When at a river by a friend he was baptized and came up out of the water and a dove descended on him, the Holy Spirit of God resided with him and the voice said to him and to us all, "You are my child, the Beloved, and with you I am well pleased."

I wish as I sat with that young woman and that mother and those parents that I had the power to make them believe these words. I wish I had some sort of instrument that I could shine a light in their soul, way down in the depths, and point to the inscription that is in all of us and say, "That's it. It's there." But I've come to realize that I can't do that. Because that's where faith resides. Faith for us is in that space between what we think we're about, what we've heard before, what someone has uttered about us that we have let get deep inside of us. Faith is that decision between do I trust those words, or do I trust the words of our baptism? My hope is that all of us who have been baptized into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ can get quiet enough and to hear again we are all children of God. We are all beloved and with us all God is well pleased. Amen.