

**January 9, 2022**

**Baptized: Becoming and Belonging**

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**Scriptures:**

**Luke 3:15-17, 21, 22**

**Isaiah 43:1-7**

And Jesus grew in wisdom, age and grace. That's from Luke chapter 2.

That's our transition from last week, when Jesus was a baby in a manger being visited by the wisemen, to today's scriptures, that Steve read from Luke chapter 3, when Jesus, as an adult, joins the crowd to be baptized.

John the Baptist is drawing large crowds and a preaching a message of change – a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of living. He was giving very practical and direct ways to get in good and right and Godly relationship with God and each other.

Jesus may seem to us, an unlikely one to 'need' this message. Yet he got in line with the crowd, starting his ministry off, identifying with any other ordinary human being. Standing alongside the soldier and the tax collector, listening to the message and waiting to be baptized. Participating in a passage from an old, tired way of living - to new life, reborn in the Spirit.

The sacrament of baptism, as sacraments are: rituals or acts that create sacred space, drawing us into a holy encounter with the Divine. Today's story takes us to that moment, that holy encounter between Jesus and the Divine when Jesus rises from the water, and God speaks, saying "You are my Son, I love you and I am pleased with you."

In that moment, core and universally asked questions about identity are answered: who am I? and whose am I? Jesus is named and claimed as a child of God and loved by God. And the rest of Jesus' ministry is built on that revelation - Jesus knowing his true identity, and his divine relationship with God, his Father. A powerful relationship of love, dependency, intimacy and trust, which became the foundation for his gospel message.

What makes this baptism story relevant for us today, is first, it reveals big truths, eternal truths. We may feel confused about political, social, or medical truths today, but as Christians, hopefully, we are able to agree on these sacred truths: we are children of God, we are brothers and sisters of Christ, and in Christ, and God loves us. For this truth to sink in, we have to take time, to quiet down, and listen beyond the voices of our culture, perhaps even beyond the voices of family and church – to the voice of God affirming us as beloved people. And once we know this truth for ourselves, we know it's true of others as well.

And second, I believe Bible stories are transferable. We inherit them in our spirit. Many of us aren't able to literally remember our baptism, perhaps we haven't been baptized ---- yet, in worship, as we did in our Call to Worship, we say "remember your baptism and be thankful." Through our shared sacred stories, we can remember Jesus' baptism, and how he stood in for us. He got in line, for us and with us, so that we can hear God say, 2000 years later, "you are my son/daughter/child, I claim you as my own and I love you." Baptism represents the grace, given to Jesus...passed on to us. Through it, God lets us know, that we are God's beloved children, who have been given the Holy Spirit, *in order to live new lives in Christ*. Once we get that message and know our true identity, now... we're ready to follow Christ, to find our mission, live our purpose and share this good news.

So, on days when we feel lost, far from God, overcome with fear, weighed down by life, burdened with guilt, weak in faith: remember your baptism, which is shorthand for: Know who you really are, know whose you are.

Remembering this story can renew our awareness of the inner strength we have in the face of difficulties, remind of the reality of our own spirituality and call us into life-giving service. We can remember the promise of forgiveness, the burning away of the chaff – freedom from those old beliefs that hold us back. And rising fresh from the waters, loved by God.

I've heard it said that if we could hear and see the angels around us, we'd know one goes before each of us saying "Make way, Child of God coming through."

Perhaps Jesus heard and saw those angels.

But for most of us, the waters of baptism, do not magically transfer these Divine realities to us.

When I was a little girl, growing up in a Southern Baptist church, and I found myself going forward to be saved and baptized, during the hymn *Just as I Am* in an altar call, in my youth, I actually did expect something magical from my baptism. It was a bit disappointing, there was no miraculous difference. Life looked and felt the same after baptism. The same fears and doubts were still there.

Decades later, after growing in wisdom, age, and grace, I've come to understand that though baptism itself may be a one-time event, it is really only the beginning of becoming baptized. I heard Sue Phillips, of the Sacred Design Lab at Harvard Divinity School, talk about our spiritual transformation, our becoming, as more of a slow burn throughout our lives rather than one time event of storming heaven and stealing fire. William Wallace, A New Zealand Methodist Minister writes that "We are not liberated solely by the experience of divinity but by the *reflective action* which should follow." He advises us to "Let the gift flow, let the fire burn, let the awareness become."

We are becoming part of that unfolding narrative of God's grace.

John Wesley said that “baptism is part of a lifelong process of salvation.”

So it seems, it will take us all our lives to realize the gift we were given at our baptism.

Our baptism publicly marks the beginning of this sacred process – whether it’s initiated as an adult or when parents baptize their little ones. Regardless, over and over, we must return to the waters to experience it and realize the gift of it.

As Luke told us in chapter two “Jesus grew in wisdom, age and grace.”

For Jesus, the next step, his *reflective action*, which followed his baptism, was 40 days of prayer and fasting in the wilderness.

We can choose by our action or inaction to let the good work God has begun in us to go dormant, and have no greater effect, or enable us to grow in wisdom and grace.

Years ago, I read a story in a Chicken Soup for Mother’s Soul book, I’ve been unable find again, so I tell it from my memory. There were two mothers who had become good friends, each had 6 children and each one had a son with Down Syndrome. One of the mother’s agonized over her son’s condition, she prayed constantly for him to be healed of it. She was a devote Catholic, and she had made a decision to take him to the Lourdes River in France, to place him in the healing waters, hoping for a miracle, so that he could be cured of Down syndrome. So, she began saving money for the trip. Her friend, who tells the story, said there was a jar on the kitchen counter that collected the extra money to go towards this pilgrimage. Finally, one day she had saved enough. With excitement and expectation, she and her son left for France.

After their return, her friend observed that her son appeared unchanged, however, his mother was noticeably different. She no longer seemed troubled and burdened. Her spirit had changed, she seemed light, easy and joyful. So, one day the friend asked her what happened on the trip to the Lourdes River. The mother said, that when they got there, she realized she loved her son, exactly as he was, and she no longer needed, nor wanted God to change him.

Many of us wait all our lives to hear that we are loved, as we are, not once we change. And of course, the reality is, we all need to change, we all need to heal, we all need to grow in wisdom and grace. However, changing is not a prerequisite for God’s love. Any more than that mother, needed her son to change to love him.

*Baptism* isn’t even a prerequisite for God’s love. However, remembering this story of Jesus’ baptism, invites us, to return to this sacrament, step in the water, take holy action, encounter God. So that we can hear and see and touch, and be reminded that we are children of God,

loved by God, forgiven by God, saved by God. Christian author Father Richard Rohr says that "God doesn't love us because we have changed, God loves us *so we can change.*"

When we remember our baptism...we must also remember, we don't do it alone. It is tempting to have our private salvation however, as Christian, we belong to a community of Christians. Reverend Taylor Burton-Edwards reminds us in his book *Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* that in the United Methodist church, at our baptisms, the congregation takes a vow "to surround us with a community of love and forgiveness, and pray for us, that we may be a disciple of Jesus Christ who walks in the way that leads to life." Burton-Edwards goes on to say that "Baptism is not an act that imparts something just to you, it is an act that brings you into a spiritual relationship with the whole body of Christ. In which you are becoming one with them and they are becoming one with you."

John the Baptist apparently knew the reconciling, redemptive power of the water. That it held grace and cleansing for our soul as much as our body. Life can become so burdened with our shame, our mistakes, our should of and could ofs ---- that is not freedom in Christ, it's not the liberation that God desires for us. If we are chained to our past, we cannot walk as children of God, as disciples of Jesus Christ, who walk in the ways that leads to life.

So come to the waters of baptism, again, or for the first time, just as you are. Receive the gift of grace, the blessings of knowing who you are and whose you are. Receive the grace of continual forgiveness, surrender to the ongoing transformation. Remember your relationship with God – that you are utterly dependent and wholly loved. Remember the church, to which you belong, that has taken vows to surround you with love and forgiveness and pray for you. And surround others with that same spirit of love, forgiveness and prayer.

I love the cyclical nature of our tradition. This chance once again, right here, at the beginning of the year, to remember our baptism. To be renewed. To begin again. To be reminded and remind one another of this sacrament, this holy act, these sacred moments, which continue to draw us into an encounter with the Divine, into union with God and one another. Let's remember our baptism and be truly thankful!