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January 13, 2019

Jesus' Baptism

Isaiah 43:1-2

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.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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's baptism account is different than the one we find in other gospels, for the focus begins on John who is inviting people out to the wilderness to receive a baptism of repentance. John uses water to mark this turning away from sin, this new beginning. Like Jesus, he is a good Jewish prophet who knows the traditions of his people, including the cleansing bath taken by Jews for various religious reasons. This baptism by John is about more than just a ritual cleansing of the externals, the appearance of things, but a deep internal cleansing, a baptism of repentance, a turning away from sin and receiving forgiveness for wrongs done.

John has been gaining quite a following in the wilderness, with disciples of his own, but he assures them – quite forcefully, that he is not the Messiah, he is simply preparing the way for the one who is greater than he. While John's baptism of repentance is done with water, the one who comes will baptize people with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The image John uses of Jesus with the winnowing fork in his hand, separating out the good from the bad wheat, and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire leaves us with a sense of a final hell-fire judgement. But, I believe John's metaphor is not so easily applied.

Rather than a wielder of a winnowing fork and fire at the final judgement, I look at the way Jesus lived his life. He shows us how to live in relation with those around us, how to set aside our tendency to judge others, and focus instead on the blessings in life, and how to share them with the world. Rather than end time judgement, I interpret this metaphor of winnowing fork and unquenchable fire burning away the chaff of our poor choices, our hurtful thoughts and impulses, the worst parts of ourselves that Jesus helps us to separate from with that winnowing fork.

It is in baptism that we make promises to set aside those things that would lead us astray... we commit to turning away from evil and hate, choosing love in action instead. We accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. While baptism is a ritual that we only do once, it is something that takes a lifetime to live out, for these are things we will need to do our whole lives long, resisting evil and choosing love instead! Baptism is not a "get out of hell" free card, nor it is a magic bullet that protects us from all ills... it is a way of life that leads us to love – love of God and love of our neighbors.

Baptism does not eliminate our difficulties, fix our problems, take away the pain, or change the circumstances of our lives. Instead it changes us and offers a way through those difficulties, sorrows, problems, and circumstances. Baptism offers us a new way of being – one in relationship with God.

The voice from heaven says, "You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." These words may come from heaven but they do not come out of the blue: they echo God's words from Isaiah long before: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine...you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you" (43:1b, 4a).

Remembered and beloved. God remembers us, Isaiah says; in fact, God reassures us, "I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" (49:16). God's love didn't start yesterday, or even in the New Testament. It is ancient, before time, it is from of old, and it is focused on each and every one of us, by name. We belong to God, and God loves us.

Ritually we are baptized only once. Yet throughout our life we return to the waters of baptism. Martin Luther, the great Reformation leader, passionately reminded people to "Remember your baptism!" Many (but certainly not all) of us were baptized as babies and can't "remember" our baptisms, of course. But I think Luther meant something bigger than our

historical memory of one day. In his catechism, Luther wrote, "A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued." I think Martin Luther wanted us to remember each day who we are, and whose we are, and how beloved we are.

Daily we return to the baptismal waters through living our baptismal vows. Sometimes our own body provides the waters of baptism, tears. St. Ephrem the Syrian spoke of our eyes as two baptismal fonts. Tears are the body's own baptismal waters that cleanse, heal, and renew life. Other times the circumstances of life, things done and left undone by us and others, the ups and downs of living, push us back to the waters of baptism. We return in order to again be immersed into the open heavens, to be bathed by God's breath, the Holy Spirit, and to let the name "beloved" wash over us.

These waters of baptism we have before us today have already been prayed over and consecrated for the sacrament of baptism. With these waters, I invite you to come forward as you wish to remember your baptism... remember who and whose you are... As we sing our song of reflection, "Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters," may the Spirit move you to come forward and touch the water and either touch your forehead or the back of your hand. In this time of reflection and response,

Let this water remind us... that each of us is a Child of God, named and claimed just as we are.

Let this water remind us... that we are called to lament, crying "How Long, O God" and renouncing evil and oppression whenever we witness it.

Let this water remind us... that we are the representatives of Christ as we dream of a church where justice is flowing.

Let this water remind us... that we can choose love and make forgiveness our never-ending prayer.

Let this water remind us... that God has work for us to do.

Let us sing and remember together this gift of water and the Spirit. Amen.