

**"Passing through the Waters"
Sermon for Baptism of the Lord
Lectionary Year C
January 10, 2010**

**Texts: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
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What happens when we are baptized? What is its significance for us as Christians? Why do we baptize? Why do we do it with infants as well as adults?

These are just a few of the many questions I get asked rather frequently about baptism. Baptism is a Christian act that predates the beginning of the church, as we see here in our text from Luke. The Gospels tell us that Jesus began his ministry by being baptized by John in the Jordan River, while the church itself is not inaugurated until after Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension into heaven, followed by the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But we see here a preview of the coming of the Spirit; the Spirit comes upon Jesus as it would all believers after Pentecost. Here the Spirit is pictured as a descending dove, while at Pentecost, the Spirit's coming is described in terms of tongues of fire. That's why we have two primary symbols in the church for the Spirit—dove and fire.

From the beginning of the church, then, *baptism has been seen as a rite of beginning*, the act which signifies the start of a believer's

spiritual pilgrimage. It was that way for Jesus, and it is that way for us. One of the reasons we baptize infants in our tradition is our belief that a person's spiritual pilgrimage begins at birth. A child begins a faith journey as soon as she or he is born, because a child's basic understanding of faith is built upon the relationship with his or her parents. A child's faith is nurtured at home, where she or he first experiences love, care, safety, trust, dependence, the meeting of needs, and what it means to be valued and blessed.

We baptize infants before they can know what it means because we love them before they understand intellectually what love means, we feed them before they can appreciate the value of nourishment, and we provide a safe environment for them before they comprehend the importance of home and family.

So when we baptize a baby, a child, a teenager, or an adult, what is that act saying and signifying? There are a lot of things we could mention this morning. Indeed, entire books have been written on the subject of baptism, its history and its meaning. But based on our passages of scripture for this morning from Luke's Gospel and from the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, I want to mention two aspects in particular of what we believe about baptism.

Baptism is an experience of being named. In baptism, we are named by God. All of us have different names, signifying our

uniqueness before God. Yet *in baptism, all of us are given the same name*, "child of God," signifying our oneness with God and our unity with one another in God. God says to Jesus at his baptism, "You are my Son, . . ." God says the same thing to each of us in our baptism, "You are my daughter, my son." Isaiah describes how God feels about the nation of Israel. God says to his people, "I have called you by name, . . . you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, [so much that] I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life."

In baptism we are named, and the *name we are given is the beloved child of God*. When the Holy Spirit descends upon us, we hear God saying to us: "You are my Beloved. I have called you by name . . . I created you from the depths of the earth, I knitted you together in your mother's womb. Before your parents knew you, I already loved you. Before they gave you a name, I already had named you: you are the Beloved.

I brought you from your mother's body and blew into you my breath. I have hid you in the shadow of my wings. I know every hair on your head, every whisper of your heart. Wherever you go, I will go with you. I will feed you with a bread that will satisfy your deepest hunger and give you drink that will quench your deepest thirst. You belong to me and I to you. I am your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your spouse, your best friend, even your child (for

I came as a child). I am all of these and more, for you are my Beloved. Nothing will ever undo that. I will love you with an everlasting love. We are one" [Stephen Shoemaker's adaptation of Henri Nouwen's words in *Life of the Beloved*, p. 31].

That is the voice of God that speaks to you at your baptism. The Spirit opens your heart to hear it when you pray as Jesus did following his baptism. You are the Beloved. Your spiritual journey starts here, whether you begin it at two months or twenty years or forty years or eighty years old. This spiritual journey for all of us is *to become who we are*; to become fully and completely what we have been named, the Beloved, in all we think, say, or do. And this becoming who we are is not automatic or necessarily easy. It is a quest and a challenge that lasts a lifetime.

You see, we live with a sense of curse and self-rejection. We hear messages all the time that say, "You are not the Beloved. You're just the opposite. You're no good, you're no good, you're good, Baby, you're no good." There are many voices reinforcing that message, not the least of which is our own voice. We can be our own worst critic and enemy. That is why each of us must never forget our baptism and the naming which takes place in it; we must seek to live daily as God's Beloved.

The more we become who we are, that is, the Beloved, the less our spirits are driven by the compulsions of the false self: pride, envy, lust, and greed. The more we become the Beloved the less we are captive to the cultural addictions which hold us in their sway. The more we become the Beloved the less frenzied is our attempt to bolster the self through endless doing and the less we need to puff ourselves up by putting others down. The more we live the life of the Beloved, the less fearful our existence is and the more peaceable it becomes.

The more we live the life of the Beloved the less preoccupied we are with ourselves. The more we live the life of the Beloved the more we can give ourselves to others, so that they too may know that they are the Beloved [Stephen Shoemaker, "Praying Our Father: New 'Life of the Beloved,'" preached February 20, 1994, pp. 5-6]. Baptism is an experience of being named the Beloved so that we can spend the rest of our lives understanding and appropriating what that name means for us and for all our brothers and sisters in the world.

But not only is baptism an experience of being named, **baptism is an experience of being claimed.** We not only are *named* by God, we are *claimed* by God. God says to us, "You are mine; you belong to me." And being claimed by God means that God is with us and for us. God says to Jesus at his baptism, "I am well pleased with you." And Isaiah

describes God's presence with his people Israel this way, "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."

God doesn't just name us and send us out into the world to fend for ourselves. No loving parent does that. Baptism points to God's claim on our lives. It is a sign, a mark, a brand. We belong to God and live under God's, care and concern, protection and providence.

This doesn't mean that we never face challenges, trials, tribulations, tests, temptations. Do you recall what happened to Jesus immediately following his baptism? The same Spirit that descended on him like a dove drove him into the wilderness to experience the challenging options, the tough choices, the difficult decisions presented him by Satan. God's claim on us does not exempt us from suffering either. Look to Jesus for that as well. The Beloved Son of God's life ends with the haunting question, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, abandoned me, and left me alone?" While God promises us his presence, there are times when we may feel isolated.

Notice carefully what Isaiah says. Through the prophet Isaiah God is not suggesting there are no waters or rivers, fire or flame. Life under God's claim is not the absence of these threats. What God

promises is that *we will get through them*—through the waters and rivers, through the fire and flame, without being overwhelmed or consumed. No matter what the difficulty, God will see us through it. With God's help, we will make it to the other side of whatever crisis we are facing.

Here is where the Holy Spirit comes in. In baptism we are given the gift of the Spirit, God's continual presence in us. It is this presence of God, working in our minds and hearts, that guides us, sustains us, encourages us, enables us, affirms us, supports us, and delivers us through the rough waters and the fiery trials of life. It is the Spirit's work in our lives that allows God to continue to lay claim to us. It is the Spirit that keeps us connected to God and God's loving care for us.

We don't use a lot of water to baptize people in our tradition. Methodists never have been known for going overboard at anything. We operate with an understanding sort of like the old Brylcreem commercial, believing that "a little dab will do you." But please don't let the amount of water we use lessen your appreciation for what that water means. Baptism is powerful rite, act, symbol, ordinance, sacrament—no matter how much or how little water is used and no matter whether that water comes from the River Jordan or the tap in the kitchen. Baptism affirms that you are named by God as his

Beloved, and you are claimed by *God* as his own, with all the privileges and responsibilities that come with being a child of *God*. That's what it means when we pass through these waters.