

Baptism Isaiah 43: 1-7; Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

On many calendars, last Thursday, January 6, was listed as Epiphany- a day recognized as the coming of the Wise Men to the Christ Child. It is considered a day of importance because it was a time when Gentiles were introduced to Christ. For us, Epiphany continues to be recognized the second Sunday after Christmas until Transfiguration Sunday and the beginning of Lent. During that time this year of 2022, the Lectionary continues a focus on the Gospel of Luke which of course, is where we started in last year's Season of Advent. With only a couple of exceptions, the recommendation for our Gospel reading each week from now until Palm Sunday will be from the Gospel of Luke. That seems like many weeks away, but a count showed just twelve weeks.

Because it was Epiphany just a few days ago, it would have been quite appropriate to pursue that topic and its importance in a message this morning. However, since today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday, it seemed more important to consider Jesus' baptism which also gives us a chance to remember our own baptism.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas and now so quickly it seems, we have moved from Christ's birth to his ministry. Very little is noted in Scripture of Jesus early life, with the exception of his being brought to the temple when he was eight days old and then when he was twelve, he stayed in the temple teaching scholars rather than going home with his parents as was expected.

This first Sunday of seven Epiphany Sundays each year is always considered the Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Now the Christmas focus is over, and as with the Lectionary, we move ahead to Jesus beginning his ministry. It does feel significant to consider the "flow" from the joy of the birth of a Christ Child, to the baptism of that Child in order that he may fulfill his ministry, to the few weeks of Epiphany Time learning from this Child sent by God, to once again move into a Lenten Time of Introspection followed by the crucifixion, death and glorious resurrection of our Lord. From joy of Jesus' birth, to remembering our baptism, to learning from the Master, recognizing our weaknesses during Lent and to finish again with joy at Christ's resurrection and overcoming death. May we pray God's guidance on the journey of the next weeks.

I found it interesting that our Old Testament scripture from Isaiah is paired with the lectionary account of the Baptism of Christ. However, we can find a relationship between them by realizing the Prophet Isaiah directed his words to the Israelite exiles in Babylonia, where in spite of years of misery while in captivity, Israel had been called, summoned by God for particular service. The whole world is being blessed even today through the election of this particular people as God's people. The Christian Church did not exist before God prefigured it in his covenant with the people of Israel and then called it into being in Jesus Christ. Only

because of God's act, do we have this beloved community into which we are baptized, and apart from God in Jesus Christ there is no true church.

The lectionary links Isaiah's account of the call and commissioning of Israel with Jesus' baptism in Luke 3. The chapters prior to Isaiah 43 are the condemnation of the people's actions and the ultimate result of their being torn from their homeland. However, Isaiah 43 is a dramatic shift. From condemnation and warning in earlier chapters of Isaiah, listen to the words used in Isaiah 43- "Do not fear, I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, Do not fear, for I am with you;" The essence of these words are echoed in our scripture from Luke and the Baptism of Christ.

The Baptism of Jesus by his cousin, John the Baptist, is found in all four gospels- some in greater detail than others. The fact that Jesus is deliberate about needing Baptism sometimes raises questions. First of all, why does the Christ, perfect in every way, need to be baptized? Was he not fully equipped to do as God intended? The reality is that Jesus' baptism is just one more evidence of his humanity, how he became like us and experienced human emotions. His baptism marked the beginning of his setting out to do the work he came to do. As Jesus stands praying following his Baptism by John- Luke and well as Matthew and Mark all record the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus and a voice saying, "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." God's spectacular and public acknowledgment of Jesus as the Messiah was emphasized by his Baptism and by the Holy Spirit's appearance as a dove. This shifted Baptism from an event that was only proof of repentance from sin, as John's baptisms had been, to also one being filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift of the Holy Spirit set Jesus' Baptism apart from previous baptisms and went with Jesus as he moved forward into his ministry. Through our Baptism we, too, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit which helps us more fully know Christ and receive guidance for our lives.

One thing of note- a clarification, if nothing else. It is typical when we see pictures of Jesus' baptism, we see John and Jesus standing alone in the water with John lifting water over Jesus. But listen to the words of verse 21 of Luke 3, "Now when all the people were baptized...." I find this "refreshed" image important. All four gospels record a crowd of people gathered to hear John the Baptist preach. But it feels important to recognize that Jesus was baptized with many other people- a gathered community- much as our Presbyterian belief emphasizes Baptism being done with the congregation present, not just one or two persons being present.

A second interesting image to note- it is at this point in Jesus Baptism when we clearly see or hear the Trinity in evidence- the Creator God, the Christ and the Holy Spirit are all present, visible and/or heard. Since the word Trinity is not mentioned in the Bible, it is helpful for us to remember the many aspects of God as we attempt to comprehend the fullness of God- one in three- Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit- yet one God.

When asked what is the first thing that comes to mind about baptism, I would guess many would mention water. Appropriately so, since water is used as a visible symbol in some way for all those who practice baptism. The form- sprinkling, poured, partial or total immersion, infant or adult baptism- may differ but water is used in some way just as we find the bread and the cup used in the sacrament of Communion. As Baptism plays an important part in our spiritual lives, so too, water is essential in our human lives. Actually, our human bodies can survive longer without food than without water. Much time and energy in human lives is spent over a concern for the quality of water, especially that which we drink. Around the world, and even in the United States, thousands are sickened each year because of polluted water.

The form of Baptism varies greatly, but also there is the issue of the water used. For some, there may be a sense that special water is used or that someone was able to visit and even bring water home from the River Jordan for the occasion. For most of us, it is likely understood that the church faucet- slightly warmed water, of course- is the logical source for water used in Baptism. The source is likely not essential and for some possibly not even considered. Might make an interesting discussion sometime- does it make a difference? Hopefully, bottom line, we would agree that the sacrament itself, the blessing of both the water and the individual, and the important involvement of the gift of the Holy Spirit should be the primary focus.

Just as there are several beliefs about the water used, so there are a variety of understandings about when and how Baptism is administered. Some believe Baptism is necessary in order to get into heaven. Some churches will accept another church's Baptism while others will not. Some believe only in adult Baptism. For Presbyterians, Baptism- typically sprinkling- is one of two sacraments- the other being the Lord's Supper. We believe that one Baptism-per person-per lifetime- is all that is necessary and we do honor the Baptisms of other faith traditions.

It seems we would be remiss if we didn't take time to consider the outcome or response to our Baptism. This focus lies within both our Scripture readings for this morning as well as is very much a part of our Baptisms.

God said to Israel, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name...I will be with you." Israel, even though they had lived through terrible time being exiles, God had a plan- a vocation- for them- "God called them by name."

Luke records Jesus Baptism in the River Jordan as the final act Jesus accomplished before he would move forward into the ministry to which he had been called. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended upon him and God's voice said, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." With that affirmation- that plan- a vocation- Jesus begins his ministry.

For us, our Baptism- even though we may have been very young when we were baptized- we were brought into the community of God with the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Our walk with God- our vocation- began at that moment and continues until our death and new life in eternity.

Considering our Baptism, how do we consider our call- the plan, the vocation God has in mind for us? Sometimes, I wonder if church members have often separated their lives in their work-a-day world from that of their "ministry" as baptized children of God. Often, we only see the vision of the priestly role as one set aside for the "minister" or the ordained person in charge of the congregation. "Lay person" is considered by most to be someone who does not engage in full-time paid ministry. Professionally speaking- that is accurate: ordained clergy typically are paid for their efforts while lay people typically are not. Thinking like that runs the danger of turning clergy into salespersons of religion and lay people into consumers, who shop around for the church that offers them the best product. Affirming the ministry of every baptized Christian often seems to be beyond what should be expected. It seems to me that the Presbyterian Church has addressed this to some extent by calling those ordained to Word and Sacrament, "Teaching Elders." Those who have also been ordained as an Elder/Session member are called, "Ruling Elders." At the time of Ordination and Installation of Clergy, Elders or Deacons, the questions asked are the same for all three with the exception of the final question which is specific to the role to which they are being called.

You have heard me say before and I will repeat it- everyone has a faith story begun when they were baptized and developed as they have walked through life with God's guidance. I believe sharing our faith is an important part of our "ministry" as baptized children of God. We have been blessed with messages from some of our members and I pray we will hear from others in the future.

We are, through our Baptism, set aside as part of God's community. We receive the gift of God's Spirit enabling us to understand and grow as children of God. We also know the blessing of the example of Jesus' teaching ministry, and that we share the benefits of Christ's ultimate death on the cross and the glorious gift of victory over death on Easter morning. As the recipients of such awesome love and grace, may we rededicate ourselves again and experience anew God's call in our lives as part of the Baptized company of God's people. Amen.