

The Baptism of Jesus

SERMON FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, JANUARY 9, 2022

Readings: Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22;; Psalm 29

Sermon text: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

This was a keepsake of my mother's, a needlepoint portrait of Jesus wearing a crown of very small appliquéd flowers. It was from her grandparents, Matilda and Hermann Sorgenfrei. They must have brought it with them on the journey from Germany in the 1880s to Brazil, then Texas and finally Long Beach California. It reads, in German, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." It is a line from Isaiah 43, part of the passage we heard read earlier.

I discovered it in the basement storage area of my mother's condominium in Tarrytown back in 1995. There had been a minor flood and I went to help retrieve items, among them this. At the time I was in the middle of discerning whether or not I should pursue ordination as a priest in the Episcopal Church—I was a member here, working with the then Rector Ken Swanson. When I found this, and learned what it said, I took it as a sign. A sign saying yes.

Do not fear, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name you are mine.

That's good news—and utterly consistent with the gospel proclamation that the angel told the shepherds: do not fear, for to you this day is born a savior, Jesus Christ.

But we do fear, still, and rightly so, for this a fearful time we live in. The very air we breath, the people we love, are potential threats, carriers of a viral disease. Strangers are assessed accordingly—masked, vaxxed, boosted—relatively safe, permission to come on board. When will it end, we ask, as another Greek letter pops up. Soon I hope. Then we can simply fear for the future of our democracy and the fate of the world.

What then are we supposed to make of the prophet's promise made in the name of God, Creator and Redeemer, that Jacob/Israel—and by extension we who have been grafted through Christ into the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, made part of God's people called by the name

Israel—should not fear, for we have been set aside as God’s own beloved, known by name? We will pass safely through the trials of water and fire—and presumably air. Really? Are we safe yet? Not even in church. We wear masks, keep distance—but there is still risk.

One answer would be that God’s promise is not protection against the risks of life, for we remain mortal, frail, prone to accident, destined to age and die, and there is no *deus ex machina* to snatch us away from a car accident or a cancer diagnosis. We had best drive safely and follow the doctor’s advice. If Jesus had to suffer and die, then we can expect to do so too—and also hope for a resurrection like his.

No, what God is redeeming us from is not the trials and tribulations of life but the state of being outside the covenant, strangers to God, on our own in a world which God created and formed, but which in key ways has wandered from harmony with God and the rest of creation. A world without God and grace, and the hope of eternal life, without a foundation in justice and love, but rather a world of war over scarce resources, of individuals huddling in protective circles and tribes, fearful of others, living by the iron rule, do unto others before they do unto you.

The threat of that world seems to be growing, and we who are people of the Way of Love, the Way of Jesus had better put on the armor of light—as I preached about some weeks ago. But, as I said also, not to prepare for battle against supposed ideological enemies or demonized others. But in order to live as children of light, as people freed from a kind of fear, people who are called by name, by the Holy Spirit, to love and serve God and neighbor, and to strive for justice and peace.

For we are people who have been baptized by the Spirit into the covenant of grace. Thanks to be to God who sent the Only Begotten to be born of a woman and baptized by John—an event we celebrate this morning.

Think about this sacred baptism for a moment. Think about God becoming human—as we claim is the singular mystery of the life of Jesus, the Son of God. The one who created and formed the universe, who penetrates and supports all being, who is the pattern and purpose, the Logos of all things, became human. And grew up in a tradesmen’s family in north Israel, in a small town of humble people, observing the Torah within an oppressive Roman empire.

Luke reports that Jesus was thirty when he began his work, which began with getting baptized by John. So he was not naive. He knew life. He knew the sight of soldiers bullying peasants, of the rich and powerful taking from the poor and weak. It was a world of slaves and sudden death, with little justice. He had seen despair, and crime, and ignorance and hunger. He knew the grim reality of the hard and short lives of his fellow Jews.

He knew also the joy, the songs, the celebrations; he too worshipped at the Temple the God whom he knew as Abba, Father. So that when he went to the river to be baptized by John he knew what he was doing. He was agreeing to undertake the final immersion into humanity that the Father had sent him to do: to take on the work of proclamation, healing and teaching, and to bear the sins of the world for the sake of reconciliation. No wonder that when he emerged from the water he not only heard the reassuring voice of the Father calling him Beloved but also the urging of the Spirit driving him into the desert, there to wrestle with the temptations of his work, and prepare for the contest with Satan for the soul of the world.

Was he afraid? In the desert alone, with the wild beasts stalking in the night, with the cold and the hunger of his solitary struggle? I don't know. I only know that he emerged from the water and from the desert prepared to proclaim the good news that God loves us, calls each of us by name, and tells us, you are not alone. God is with us, Emmanuel.

This is what we learn in baptism. We are not alone. We are cleansed from sin, initiated into the family of God, and anointed by the Spirit as Christ's own for ever. We are unbreakably inseparably one with God.

We may wander and rebel, refuse grace, denounce religion, stew in our anger and presumed wisdom. But it will not work, in the end. God's love will overcome. This is my faith and my hope. All Israel will be saved, all creation, through Christ, who became human so that we might become part of God. It is a great mystery, as Paul writes in Romans 11. All Israel will be saved. How he does not know—he can only conclude with a doxology praising God:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ...For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36).

So there you are. Claimed, named and embraced by God. Baptized by water and the Spirit. Ready to face whatever comes with hope and courage, wisdom and compassion. Fear not, my friends, you like Jesus are Beloved, you like Jesus are sent to proclaim good news, you like Jesus will be tried by fire, and you like Jesus will rise like a phoenix, reborn in glory. Do not fear, for you are called by name, you are God's own.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

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