

Luke 3:15-21 and Isaiah 43

Today we, the gathered body of Christ, remember the gifts which God gives us in Holy Baptism. God acts out of infinite love to call us and claim us and give us the gift of identity. Once baptized, if anyone in the world questions us about our vocation and purpose in life, we can always answer that we are a child of God living into the life of faith. In baptism we take on a new name, "Christian," and a way of life.

In baptism, we live into a new reality which Jesus called the "Kingdom of God." In baptism we find that we are loved and given great promises of God. These promises are in brief that God is for and with us as we make our way through life. What happens in baptism is the inauguration of the way of a life of grace shown to us through God in Jesus Christ. In addition we are given the promise that as children of God, there is nothing in all creation that will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. To live into the faith is a way of life because we will need to worship, pray and study to remain grounded as there are plenty of things which are opposed to God that will vie for our attention and allegiance.

We remember our baptism today, playfully, with the sprinkling of water at the beginning of worship. You can remember your baptism anytime you encounter water, like when you wash your face or brush your teeth, or when you find yourself getting wet from a rain shower or immersed in a dunk tank. That's a common experience, right? My experience in the dunk tank besides raising some funds was that it was salutary for my sons and others who may have differed with me over an issue. I got "washed" and they felt better. For those of us who live in the northland, technically snow could help you remember, especially when a fresh snowfall covers the earth and makes the landscape bright again.

The root Greek word *baptisma* means a bath or washing. Anytime we are cleaned up with water we can remember our once-in-a-lifetime immersion or washing of the Christian Church. Christ commands us to baptize using an ordinary element of the earth, that is, water, together with his promise-filled word. Whether we bring our children to baptism or we come as older youth or adults, we trust that God is present in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. We trust that the Holy Spirit descends on the baptized and remains.

Whether we make promises on behalf of our children or we assent at an older age, a new way of life is established. In baptism we say “no” to systems and forces which fail time after time to produce life and instead lead one only towards destruction or endless seeking or death; and we say “yes” to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the promises God gives, and a way of life which is most clearly seen in following Christ.

This brings us to our text from the gospel of Luke. The hopes of the people have been raised in this gospel when we recall the following stories: Jesus’ birth, Jesus’ astounding wisdom displayed in the Temple at the age of 12, and the appearance of John the Baptist. The people were surely looking for a Messiah who would come with great might and conquer their political foes so that they might freely govern themselves. Jesus was born into a world where people were oppressed and could be held captive by great political forces or cruel circumstances. The people who heard John’s preaching longed for someone who was strong enough and mighty enough to conquer such things.

We know this kind of hunger for might. I think it can be easy to imagine that having power and control will lead to a better or brighter future. This can happen in most any arena, be it politics, the military, in medical fields, in the economy, in the race for the latest technology, and in families. We turn to might and force as a means to individual freedom. If we simply had more money, more political clout, the latest in technology, we imagine we would be happy and free.

A study at Princeton about ten years ago found that money could buy happiness up to about \$ 75,000 of annual salary. Earnings over that amount did not lead to a substantial increase in happiness. Then a different analysis estimated the cost of a life where one would have the best of many things. This included an apartment on 5th Avenue in New York, two kids going to private school, vacation homes in the Caribbean and the Hamptons, a robust ability to give to charity, a substantial art collection, with a maid, driver and chef. The cost was tens of millions of dollars but with no guarantee of happiness. Other studies pointed to the value of what you did to earn your money and how you used money that mattered for one’s level of satisfaction.

If we get the right technology our work or life will be better. Freedom! That’s only true until the next generation of technology hits the market in another year or

two, as we all well know. Happiness is fleeting. If our country has the biggest weapons no one will dare mess with us. But then we find we have to answer to our enemies upgrade in weapons. We find ourselves stuck in systems which never lead us to experience joy. The systems fail to deliver what God promises, such things as friendship, forgiveness, compassion and new life.

Jesus was born into a world of systemic sin. What if his baptism is a signal that he understood what it meant that he was at once of divine nature and of human nature? What if Jesus was not just standing in solidarity with the human world, he was fully aware of its tragic structure? In Luke we see that Jesus is both aligned with God's will and unable to escape the tragic structure of the world. John the Baptist would come before him, but when he called out Herod for his wicked way, he was quickly dealt with.

Jesus, too, will follow with bold speech and actions. As he comes to the place where John was baptizing he puts himself all "in" for us. He begins by putting himself into the waters of baptism. The Holy Spirit that descends on him will fill him throughout his journey on earth. Luke's story will tell us Jesus goes where the Spirit leads him. He puts himself all "in" with the purpose of bringing God's forgiveness to us and to the world. He brings forgiveness for us who try to cling to systems of might and control. At his washing, Jesus is assured that God is pleased with him for putting himself all "in" for us. At Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, we are pleased that he has done this, too. Because Jesus goes all "in" for us, we are redeemed and saved and given freedom like no other.

The resurrection of Christ Jesus shows us the depths of God's love for us. When this love gets through to us, we find ourselves trusting in the promises of God and relying on God for our future rather than in our fascinations with might and power and control. When we rely on God we can look at the powers of the world with a clearer mind and be honest about their limitations and dangers. When we trust Jesus' promise of forgiveness, we are freed to live as forgiven people, putting ourselves all "in" in service to others, so that they might also know the depths of God's love for them.

But it all begins rather simply. God gives a clear word of his love. To Jesus, God word was this, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." This word is an echo of an older word to God's people when they were facing forces

beyond their control. At a time when they were exiled in a foreign land, God's word came to them to assure them that the arc of their life was beyond their present circumstances. God came to help them remember that they as a people were his chosen people and that they mattered to him. God came to them to let them know that even in this time when they lost, that he was still with them, and that he was at work providing a future for them.

He did this by giving them a clear word, "You are precious, you are honored, and I love you." When the people Israel heard this, they could breathe easier.