

Sermon "From the Waters of Baptism"
Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
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Isaiah 42: 1-9

⁴² Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

² He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;

³ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁵ Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:

⁶ I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,

⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁸ I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Matthew 3: 13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' 15 But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved,* with whom I am well pleased.'

Sermon "From the Waters of Baptism"

In this morning's scripture, Jesus has come to the river Jordan to be baptized by John. And John tries to refuse Jesus' request. He tries to tell Jesus that Jesus should baptize him. Despite the fact that John is a prophet in the wilderness and people flock to him so that John can tell them to repent – to turn their lives around – and to be baptized, John does not feel worthy to baptize Jesus. Can you blame him?

After all, John knew that Jesus was the one sent by God. In the water of Elizabeth's womb, John moved and wiggled and kicked when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, entered their house. John has known that Jesus was special since before he was born. John knew who Jesus was. In the deepest recesses of his soul, John has known the identity of Jesus. John knew that Jesus should be baptizing him. Jesus was not an ordinary person, in need of repentance.

But Jesus insisted that John baptize him – "let it be so for now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." Now, it really makes no sense that Jesus should come to John to be baptized, as a person in need of repentance and transformation. It made no sense that Jesus should step off the shore into the waters of the river Jordan, walk out to his waist, and turn toward John. It made no sense that John should immerse him in the waters of the Jordan – water that symbolized cleansing and rebirth - and then bring Jesus back up with water dripping from Jesus' hair and face.

Jesus did not need to do that – at least not for himself. He did not have sins to confess or need to repent and transform his life. But Jesus wanted to be an example to the people. He chose to be baptized to demonstrate his willingness to live according to the law and live a righteous life.

And as Jesus came up out of the water, dripping wet, a dove, the Spirit, descended upon him and Jesus heard the voice of God calling him beloved. Beloved. “This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” We don’t know how many people heard those words of God, but they are powerful. God calling Jesus “beloved” is powerful.

I invite you now, if you would like, to try something, to close your eyes and quiet your thoughts. Take a moment to do that. Now I invite you to imagine you are standing on the shore at the edge of the river – a still, calm, cool river. It is a nice warm day. You have come to be baptized – to be immersed in the waters.

Imagine taking off your sandals and stepping into the water. Your toes feel the wet and cool water with that first step. Then as you walk into the river, you feel the water cover your feet. As you continue the water is at your ankles, then your knees, then it’s at your hips. You keep walking until you are waist deep in the water. You turn around and Jesus is beside you. You are looking into his gentle and loving face. You fold your arms across your chest. Jesus places one hand on your back to support you and the other on your forearms to guide you as he lowers you backward into the water for a moment.

You close your eyes but you are not afraid. Jesus is supporting you. Jesus has you. For a moment you go below the surface of the water. Then Jesus, with his strong hands and arms, lifts you up out of the water.

Sputtering, you take a breath and open your eyes. Water dripping off your head, you see Jesus looking at you with love. And he smiles. And then from somewhere, you hear the words, “This is my beloved, my son; This is my beloved my daughter, in whom I am well pleased.”

When you are ready, you may open your eyes.

Like Jesus, you are God’s beloved child.

Our baptism marks the beginning of a new life of discipleship with Christ, new life as a follower of Jesus. While all people are children of our loving God, when we are baptized we join the Christian family. We join a family that extends far beyond this church and this denomination, beyond the Christian church on earth to include all who have ever belonged to the Christian family. It is the family of all those who want to follow Jesus; the family of those who are invited to call God, the Creator, Abba or Daddy; the family of those who want to be led by the Spirit. In the sacrament of Baptism we are united and we receive God's grace. We receive forgiveness, renewal of the spirit, and the knowledge of that we are God's people, we are God's beloved - always.

In her book, Dating Jesus, Susan Campbell shares her experience of growing up in an Evangelical church. She shares the story of her baptism, her longing for her baptism and getting dressed up in her baptismal dress. She describes getting ready to be immersed in the water. And then, as she is immersed and goes under the water, her dress started floating to the surface and she was so aware and preoccupied with this - struggling to keep her dress from floating - that before she knew it, her baptism was over. She had not been able to feel anything close to a sacred moment. She felt like she missed it. She wanted a do-over.

Well, there is no need for a do-over with baptism. Once you receive the Sacrament of Baptism, you have entered God's Christian family. The sacrament is a sign of God's grace. Once you receive God's grace, it can never be taken from you. God's grace is always with you, with us. We are always God's beloved.

After Jesus was baptized he began his ministry. I believe that Jesus heard those words, "This is my Son, my beloved," throughout his life, throughout his ministry. I believe they echoed in his soul. I believe they sustained him.

Knowing that we are God's beloved, that we have God's love, is powerful. It is there for us as we live our ministry – however we see our ministry, whatever we do as our ministry. It enables us to keep going when things get tough. It enables

us to keep going even when we are not sure where we are going. It enables us to open our eyes in the morning and close our eyes at night, knowing God is with us, loving us.

When we were baptized we entered into a relationship with God, we joined a family of believers and entered into a relationship with that community. And whether we made promises on our own or whether our parents and God parents made promises for us, promises were made - promises of commitment and desire to grow in relationship with God and God's church.

At our baptism, we joined the family of those who follow a man who entered the waters of the river Jordan like an ordinary sinner – but he was not a sinner and he was not an ordinary man. He was our God, who became one of us. And though our God called water into being at creation he was willing to go down into the waters of baptism to show us the importance of transformation and to remind us of God's love. Our God was even willing to enter into death and rise from death in resurrection. Jesus, our God shares with us new life as a Christian in the world and the new life of resurrection. This is our faith.

While we only have one baptism, it is still good to recall the promises we made or that were made for us by people that loved us. It is good to affirm our beliefs and our commitment to our relationship with our God.

So as we prepare to pray and affirm our baptismal vows, let us remember these words of the apostle Paul:

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:27-28)

Now I invite you to stand in body or in spirit as we join together as a community of believers in prayer and in affirmation our baptismal vows.

Affirmation of Baptismal Vows*

Hear the words of Jesus:

I am the vine, you are the branches.

Anyone who abides in me, and I in that person,
is the one who bears much fruit.

If you abide in me and my words abide in you,

ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you.
If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.
These things I have spoken to you,
that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Pastor: Do you desire to affirm your baptism
into the faith and family of Jesus Christ?

People: I do

Pastor: Do you renounce the powers of evil
and desire the freedom of new life in Christ?

People: I do.

Pastor: Do you profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

People: I do.

Pastor: Do you promise, by the grace of God,
to be Christ's disciple, to follow the way of our Savior,
to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice,
and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?

People: I promise, with the help of God.

Pastor: Do you promise, according to the grace given you,
to grow in the Christian faith and to be a faithful member
of the church of Jesus Christ, celebrating Christ's presence
and furthering Christ's mission in the world?

People: I promise, with the help of God.

Pastor: Let us unite with the church in all times and places
in confessing our faith
in the triune God.

Pastor: Do you believe in God?

People: I do believe in God.

Pastor: Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

People: I do believe in Jesus Christ?

Pastor: Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

People: I do believe in the Holy Spirit.

All: O God, my God, known to me in Jesus Christ,

**I give myself to you as your own
to love and to serve you faithfully all the days of my life. Amen.**

Pause for a moment of silent prayer.

Pastor: Let us pray together.

**People: Almighty God, who in baptism
received us, your servants, into the church,
forgave our sins, and promised us eternal life,
increase in us the gifts of the Holy Spirit.**

Grant love for others,

joy in serving you,

peace in disagreement,

patience in suffering,

kindness toward all people,

goodness in evil times,

faithfulness in temptation,

gentleness in the face of opposition,

self –control in all things.

**Thereby strengthen us for our ministry in the world;
through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.**

* Taken from the **Book of Worship, United Church of Christ.** pp 151, 160-162