

Isaiah 43:1-7

43:1 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

43:2 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.

43:3 For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

43:4 Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.

43:5 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you;

43:6 I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth--

43:7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

3:16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

3:17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

3:21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,

3:22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Proclamation of the Word

Last month, mid-December, in the wake of multiple terrorist attacks, the massacre in Paris and the massacre in San Bernardino, CA, one presidential candidate was asked in Iowa where God was in all this.

The questioner asked, "Where was God on 9/11? Where was God in Paris?"

The candidate responded, "Where God always is — on the throne in Heaven."ⁱⁱ

That is partly true, "God is on the throne in heaven," but the whole message of this season, of Christmas, is the truth that God came down to be with us, "Emmanuel, God with us." We worship and serve an incarnational God who comes "in the flesh" and reveals to us the true nature of God. In Jesus the Messiah we see the God who also joins us in our human experience, including sin, pain, and suffering. As the Christmas Carol "Hark the Herald, Angels Sing" goes

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail, the incarnate Deity,
Pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel*

Perhaps the candidate has since remembered that having experienced Christmas and Epiphany by now. The candidate went on to say that we don't always understand God's plans, we must trust that God had a purpose in allowing such a massacre for "God's ways are not our ways."

In the footsteps of Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, and our strict Puritan heritage, he spoke. While trust in the sovereignty of God and the will of God is part of our theological Calvinist heritage as well, I do not believe it is God's plan to have people pepper innocent people with military assault weapons leaving 14 dead in San Bernardino. People did that. I do not believe it is God's plan for people to blow themselves up. I believe this because I believe Jesus is the incarnation of God in person. Jesus is the revelation of God's nature. And Jesus said "love your enemies" and "pray for those who persecute you." He said, "Love the Lord your God...and love your neighbor as you love yourself." In the face of certain death, Jesus did not wield a sword, but relied on the power of the Holy Spirit present with him throughout his life, ministry, death and resurrection. God did not cause those deaths, these tragedies. Sinful people did. And God calls sinners to repent, to turn around, and to change, to seek the path of reconciliation, righteousness, and peace. God calls us in baptism to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the Way, the Truth, the Life.

Jesus is God in the flesh. And he shows us how to live. As Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, at one point

*¹⁴ The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out, true from start to finish (The Message, John 1:14)*

While Yahweh God had always been in a covenantal relationship with his people, there was this desire for God's presence and intervention in the earlier testament.

The prophet Isaiah boldly speaks to God, "Why don't you tear the sky open and come down?" (Isaiah 64:1)

That is what God does through the work of Jesus, the Christ.

As Karoline Lewis writesⁱⁱⁱ,

That is exactly what happens here in the baptism of Jesus. The heavens are opened in the three Synoptic accounts, and "torn apart" in the Gospel of Mark. What difference does this detail make, that the heavens are opened? ... we know that it means that which separates us from God is no longer; that God is no longer behind the firmament, up in the clouds, at a distance, but here among us.

Isaiah talks about God being with us through the rivers and through the fire. I find that very comforting. But do we live with courage and faith as Baptized believers claimed by God? Or do we live in fear and apathy?

Do we raise our hands in helplessness and say,

"I do not have the power to do anything about the sin of the world. That is all on God. We will just wait here while God takes care of it all."

We are not Deists. We are Christ followers who know God as "Three in One: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." We don't believe that God made the world like a watch maker, then wound it up, and let it run. We believe that God is everywhere present through the power of the Holy Spirit that descends upon Jesus at baptism in the reading from today.

John the Baptizer sheds light on this. He issues a call to repent, to change. That is a call to action. We cooperate with God. We serve God's will and ways in this world. We believe that God gives us agency through the Holy Spirit. John says one will come that will baptize with the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit which powers Jesus and us to live with boldness. It is the Spirit that helps us live as baptized ones.

Baptism is not a limited event. It is just the beginning of the process of living as Christ's own, daily dying to self and rising to Christ. We remember our baptism over and over, each time we baptize a new Christian. When the Reformer Martin Luther felt harassed by the devil, he would cross himself saying aloud "I am baptized." He would remember regularly God's claim and protection over him.

When we say "remember your baptism" in worship, what is it that we should remember?

First of all, remember we are wholly and totally dependent on God's grace both for salvation and for faithful daily living. I love the prayer James Weldon Johnson writes in *God's Trombones*:

*O Lord, we come this morning
Knee-bowed and body-bent
Before Thy throne of grace.
O Lord--this morning--
Bow our hearts beneath our knees,*

*And our knees in some lonesome valley.
We come this morning--
Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,*

We are vessels, empty pitchers Some would say we are cracked pots through which God's Spirit dwells and works. We must drink from that fountain over and over again relying on the Holy Spirit. WE orient our lives to the ONE who "sits on the throne" **AND** who is also everywhere present, working in and through all of us. God can do both.

We are not God. We cannot do everything, but we can do something. We are vessels of the Holy Spirit, coming daily like empty pitchers to a full fountain.

Secondly, we remember to whom we belong. You are a child of God. I am a child of God, the Almighty, the Creator of the universe, made to be conformed to the image of Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Claim that promise. The promise offered to Jesus is this. "You are my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In the *Cotton Patch Gospel*^{iv} by Clarence Jordon, he writes "You are my dear Son; I'm proud of you." Just think. Before Jesus even did anything publically, he is given that affirmation and promise. We are given that affirmation and promise in our baptism, too. "You are my dear daughter, my dear son; I'm proud of you."

When you believe that something changes. It may take a lifetime to understand it, but you begin to live like it. And in turn, you begin to treat your neighbor, your friend, your brother and sister, like he or she is, too. And hopefully, you realize that you are walking around baptized. You are to interact with one another in that truth, treating others the way Jesus would treat them.

You are walking around baptized. Your forehead may be dry to the touch, but you have been marked.

You are walking around baptized. You are gifted with the power of the Holy Spirit to be used in this world not only to treat the person beside you as Jesus would, but to stand up, address the difficult challenges of our time together with others who have been marked, the church. In the instances of San Bernardino, for example, we have power to do something to make our communities safer while not demonizing all Muslims as terrorists.

The third thing to remember then is that you are not baptized separately, but are joined to the body of Christ. You belong not only to the God who loves you, but to the people that God gives you, the church.

Act 3 of William Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* opens with a conversation between Viola and a fool playing a tabour, a drum. Viola asks, "Save thee, friend, and thy music. Dost thou live by thy tabour?"

The fool replies, "No, sir, I live by the church."

"Art thou a churchman?" Viola asks.

"No such matter, sir," the fool replies. "I do live by the church; for I do live at my house, and my house doth stand by the church."(Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. Act 3, Scene 1)

There is a difference between living by the church and living IN the church. The fool missed the point. We live IN the church, not a building. We live IN the Body of Christ, his people.

North American Christians have a harder time with this I am told by friends from other parts of the world. We live by rugged individualism. We can be less community oriented. But God calls a people. Together as His body in the world, we are called to serve and seek the will of God together, work together, and when we mess up, to repent, ask forgiveness, and step out again ready to start again. That is hard work, but it is how Christian community works. As John Calvin wrote, "Faith is always personal, but never private." This is why in our church, there are no private baptisms without the faith community present.

Baptism is not a limited event. It is an ongoing process. ^vBelieve that God has redeemed and is continually redeeming you. Remember with joy your own baptism.

Trust that God calls us together to be his body in this world sent to serve

Please listen to the words of the next hymn knowing that God has chosen you. Claim this promise, "You are my beloved; I am proud of you."

Let us sing...

Laura Smith Conrad

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ⁱ James Weldon Johnson, "Listen, Lord- a Prayer" in *God's Trombones* (New York: Viking Press, 1927), 13.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/6547/did-marco-miss-christmas>

ⁱⁱⁱ Karoline Lewis, "Baptismal Epiphanies" January 3, 2016 at www.workingpreacher.org

^{iv} Clarence Jordon, *The Cotton Patch Version of Luke and Acts* (Chicago: Association Press, Follett Publishing Co., 1969), 23.

^v Our theological term for this is Sanctification. We are continually renewed to live and serve.