

The Promise of New Life

Laura Smith Conrad

January 12, 2020 Baptism A

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

In this season of Light and Epiphany, we read of God's servant, a light to the nations. We know that light to be Jesus who is the Messiah, the Christ. Throughout the Hebrew bible, God speaks of raising up a servant, a savior. And at Christmas we know that a Savior is born for us. And today we learn about the identity of this kind of Savior. Hear now the words of the Prophet Isaiah to a people who walk in darkness.

Isaiah 42:1-9 (NRSV) The Servant, a Light to the Nations

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]
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 (NRSV) The Baptism of Jesus

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 fulfill 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,^[a] with whom I am well pleased."

Proclamation of the Word

There on the front page of the newspaper, was a photo of a young man who had died.

He was only nineteen years old.

But despite the fact that Charlie died so young, his death was far from tragic.

In fact, it was triumphant.

For though he died to self as he succumbed to the waters of baptism, as he rose out of the Ocean on Easter Sunday, guided by the hands of his pastor, he was raised into new life in Christ. Through a lens splashed with saltwater, the joy was palpable. Charlie's hands were raised in exaltation as the frigid water clung to his body.

God whispered to Charlie over the crashing waters: you are beloved.

But make no mistake: the old Charlie had died, just as the new Charlie was born.

That is baptism.

A paradox- dead to self, alive to Christ.

In our Baptism the pastor speaks of the waters of chaos that ruled the deep when God created the world. The Spirit of God moved upon the waters. And when we go deep under water, especially an ocean, it is dark, deep, eerie. You cannot see more than an inch in front of you and cannot see what lurks there. You cannot breathe there.

If we stay there, we will die. We are dependent on air, just as we are dependent on the life-giving breath of God's spirit each moment. Without oxygen feeding every cell in our bodies, we suffer. When God breathes into Adam's nostrils, Adam becomes more than a lump of clay. He is a person. A human being.

DROWNING- perhaps you have had that experience or at least felt like you were.

I was thinking about baptism when I read this passage from the book *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates where his character describes drowning.

Water can be dangerous as much as it gives us life.

There is no sensation like drowning, because the feeling is not merely the agony, but the bewilderment at so alien a circumstance. The mind believes that there should be air, since there is always air to be had, and the urge to breathe is such a matter of instinct that it requires a kind of focus to bely the order...it was as though I have been shoved out of a window right into the depths of the river. There was no warning. I was just trying to breathe. I remember crying out for breath and more I remember the agony of the answer, the agony of water rushing into me, and how I answered that agony by heaving, which only invited in more water.

But somehow I steadied my thoughts, somehow I came to understand that all my thrashing could only but hasten my demise. And with that accomplished, I noted that there was light in one direction and darkness in another and deduced that the dark was the depths and the light was not. I whipped by legs behind me, and stretched out my arms toward the light, pulling the water until, at last coughing, retching, I surfaced.

And the man is saved,... literally.

In baptism, we confront that which we fear- dying. And we are given a new start- a way to live fully. Of course, we do not literally drown, but we are not the same. We have been faced with the same choice, seeing dark and light, like a drowning person, we turn toward the light in order to live. We put to death our own fear of losing control, or of selfish desires, or a lack of sense of self. We stop thrashing and turn again toward the light- the light of God's love and find our true selves. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

Some of us like Charlie will remember our baptism.

Others of us were infants and have no memory.

In Baptism we are named and claimed, before we can even respond.

We love because God loved us first.

Infants are helpless, totally dependent, just as each of us is totally dependent on God.

We were baptized on the faith of our parents, and promises were made by the whole church to teach us about God's love, to tell us the stories of Jesus, to involve us in serving, to show us the way of following Jesus.

As we turned to a new calendar year- 2020, can you believe it?

We collectively recall that it is a new year, a new you, a new us.

Some of us have new resolve to kick bad habits or commit to better health.

I plan to make time to spend with those I love, friends and family, who are out of town.

We have a friend from Seminary who just learned they can do nothing more to address her pancreatic cancer.

It has spread and all that's left to do is to love well in the time that is left.

I have lost loved ones- a friend to dementia, a brother to despair.

And I realize again how short life is and what matters most.

Some of us are ready to put 2019 to bed, or to bury it, and start new.

And a week and a half into 2020, we have already seen trouble on the international stage

As my friend says, "We need us some Jesus."

In truth, we cannot get ourselves out of most messes.

We start by remembering the truth of who we are and to whom we belong.

We commit again to walk in God's will.

In baptism we resolve, maybe over and over again, certainly by trial and error to be like Jesus, or at least to follow him.

One person posted on Instagram that his new year's resolution list was simply this:

To be like Jesus:

- party with sinners
- upset religious people
- say confusing things
- choose insignificant friends
- live.die.live again

What other faith practices would you add?

- Forgive
- love difficult people
- protect the weak and suffering

Whatever we resolve to do, we followers of Jesus, start with Baptism.

I know I am incapable of being Christ-like without the work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' Baptism reminds us we are given gifts.

We join Jesus, in being named a Beloved child, son, daughter, and God is well-pleased with us.

Whatever labels get stuck to us, or however much we try to be worthy and valued in ourselves, God gives us this gift.

We are Christ's.

We are beloved children of the fathering and mothering God.
God delights in us.
We can rest in God's promises because God is trustworthy and true.

Baptism is about repentance, but not in the way we always discuss, repentance from sin.
Repentance is a *metanoia* in Greek.
Baptism is about a transformation into a new way of being and living.
We are changed from the inside out and from the outside in.
Even Jesus was baptized, not because he was sinful, but because he was inaugurating a new way of life...a way forward.
We trade self-righteousness for God's righteousness.
We take off the old self- old insecurities, angers, and hurts, and we are clothed with Christ.
He who is Immanuel, God with us, joins us in a common Baptism, to show that he walks with us, beside us, in solidarity with our human condition.
Christ Jesus empowers us to live another way.

So today remember and really know that we are Beloved children of a God who delights in us. Some translation use "delights" rather than "well-pleased." God is like a parent whose face lights up at the thought of you.

Recently I spoke to a someone and asked about his kids who are away at school.
His face lit up as he shared how his daughter was pursuing a degree in the medical field,
how she had found her vocation, her calling,
how meaningful it was to see his child come to life
and be the person God created her to be.
Before we had been talking about routine things, but ask about his daughter, and wooo-
the countenance changed.
His face lit up. That's delight!

Once we know that kind of love for us, gifted to us by God's grace, not our own merit,
we are able to thrive, throwing away those unhealthy ways of feeling beloved: too much shopping, too much indulging, too much of whatever substitute we use to fill that need.
We begin again, start a new life.

And we begin to see every person, as God's beloved child, too.
We delight when others find peace, wholeness, healing and well-being, safety and security.
What the Scripture calls *SHALOM*.
And our scope changes.

We are no longer just concerned with ourselves.
We look out for all God's children who need that kind of shalom.

This Sunday Jesus' baptism reminds us not only of Jesus' identity, character and habits,
but also our own.

Jesus, the gentle bringer of justice who shows no partiality,
Jesus, the beloved child of God in whom God delights, is our Lord and Teacher.

We, the baptized, are chosen by God as witnesses, commanded to preach, teach and baptize, be a light
to the nations and bring release to the captives in Jesus' name.
In other words, we, like Jesus, should make our baptismal identity primary,
visible and unmistakable,
knowing nothing is more important than being named,
claimed and beloved by God.

So whatever burdens you carry,
whatever misconceptions about yourself or others you carry,
whatever self loathing or pain,
whatever hate and fear you hold for others who are children of God,
release them here.

Let God wash you,
renew you,
refresh you.
Beloved, you are now clothed with Christ.
You make God's face light up.