

Sermon January 12, 2025

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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

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."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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."

Backwards Baptismal Promises

Out of the Wilderness and into the Empire, a man baptizes with water and words of repentance and hope. "Someone greater than me is coming soon," he promises. And the people stop and wait. They hold their breath, scarcely able to hope in a time filled with violence and brutality. They turn back to the ancient promises given to the prophets, promises like we heard today:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
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.
For I am the Lord your God,

Sacred promises that the One who knows us each by name, travels with us during the most difficult times of our lives. Promises that endure for the people in LA, as they fight wildfires that burn out of control... promises that endure for the people of Ashville, as they continue to pick up the wreckage of their lives after a hurricane winds and rain. Promises that stretch out through time and space.

These promises meant so much than protection from natural elements. The people held tight to these promises as soldiers swarmed their streets and tax collectors threatened their livelihoods.

And so they waited. They waited for a King to ride in glory. A king like David or Solomon to bring Israel back to its glory. They waited... and waited... and many of them missed what happened right before their eyes, as John himself pulled Jesus deep into the baptismal waters of the Jordan River. He wasn't what they expected.

The people couldn't see what happened right before their eyes because it seemed so backwards.

- ∞ It seemed backwards for a virgin to give birth to the Christ child
- ∞ It seemed backwards for the savior to be born in a stable
- ∞ It seemed backwards for magi to ignore their instructions
- ∞ It seemed backwards for the savior to seek out sinners
- ∞ It seemed backwards for the savior to engage with women
- ∞ It seemed backwards for the savior to enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey
- ∞ It seemed backwards for the savior to be crucified
- ∞ It seemed backwards for the savior to claim victory through death & resurrection instead of a physical battle

It seemed backwards and upside down and nonsensical.

Things only appear backwards to those who do not know the story... to see the plan and presence of God in our lives. God's greatest actions happen

outside of what others see as normal or expected. After all, we are told, that in the first moments of creation, all of this was made out of chaos. Creation itself seemed backwards.

What others see as backwards is God doing the miraculous right before our eyes. Let us always be willing to see the world in a new way... the way God sees it. Let's be willing to embrace the backwards and upside-down craziness as ways that allow God to do the miraculous through our life. No one expected Christ to be sleeping in a manger or baptized in a muddy river. No one expected Christ to be hung upon a cross and no one... no one envisioned an Empty Tomb. No one but God.

In a few moments, we will remember our baptism....

(invite people to recall their baptism or invite those not yet baptized to consider whether they may feel called to baptism in the near future. Ask them to reaffirm their decision or the decision made by others for them to live a baptized life, recalling the first promises made in their life of faith.)

Our baptismal promises connect us to the one who brought us to this place. Even if we do not remember the promises made on our behalf. In this moment we hear the whispering voice, reminding us:

Do not be afraid, God tells us...

for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

Reaffirmation of our Baptism

Invitation

One: The Body of Christ continues to be renewed and refreshed. As members, we belong to the baptized and covenantal life in Christ. We gather today to affirm our faith and renew our commitments as followers of Jesus.

Affirmation of Faith (Adapted from a Reading from the Second National Meeting of United Church of Christ Women)

One: O God, because you are the source of all life And love and being, We call you Creator.

Because we know the history of your presence Among your covenanted people and honor their tradition, We call you Lord.

Because our Savior, Jesus Christ, you obedient child, Knew you intimately and spoke of you so, We call you Father.

Because you are present in each act of birth; And because you shelter, nurture and care for us, We call you Mother.

Because you hold us up And give us strength and courage When we are weak and in need, We call you Sustainer.

Because we have known you in our pain and suffering, We call you Comforter.

Because beyond pain lies your promise Of all things made new, We call you Hope.

Because you are the means of liberation And the way to freedom, We call you Deliverer.

Because you have chosen to come among us And share our common lot, Making the hard choices, suffering and dying; Because you rose victorious, bringing new life, We call you Redeemer.

Confident that you will hear, We call upon you with all the names That make you real to us, The names which create an image in our minds and hearts, An image which our souls can understand and touch. And yet we know that you are more than all of these. Blessing and power, glory and honor be unto you, our God, Amen.

Do you believe in the One of Many Names, God, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit?

All: We believe in the God of Many Names.

One: Do you reject the powers of oppression in this world, the systems that marginalize and degrade human beings and communities created by God, and the norms of the world at odds with the way of the kingdom?

All: We do, with the help of God.

One: Do you embrace grace as God's gift, to be freely given and freely received?

All: We do, with the help of God.

One: Do you recommit to the covenantal and baptized life, the cost and joy of discipleship, and the community of belonging as a member of the Body of Christ? Many: We do, with the help of God.

Renewal of Our Vows

One: John the Baptist told his disciples that he baptized them with water but the one to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit. As we receive the mark of our renewed baptismal vows, we recognize the movement of the Holy Spirit within us and among us.

You are invited to come forward to the fountain,
touch the water to your forehead
and say, "I am God's Beloved Child!"
Take a shell to remind you of our baptismal promises.

Prayer for the Baptized

One: Voice, Body, Spirit, we give thanks for the gathering of your people into a beloved community of belonging. By our baptism, we accept the invitation to public and faithful witness to the ministry of Jesus Christ in the world and to be instruments to that work. May we live the baptized life in the Spirit as caring companions of one another, with accountability, support, and grace. Shelter us in your love, nourish us in your truth, and uphold us in your word. May it be so. Amen.

Lord's Prayer