

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
January 12, 2025
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
Isaiah 43: 1-7
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

“Baptism 101: Claimed and Called”

Every year on the Sunday following Epiphany, the church takes a short rest stop by the banks of the Jordan River to hear God say to Jesus, “YOU are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” On the same stop, the church looks back to the days of Isaiah when God whispered to the adopted child Israel, “YOU are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.”

It’s a heart-warming message to hear, and it’s a beautiful message to hear at the beginning of a new year.

And yet, not to be the bearer of bad news, especially since my role is to be the bearer of **the good news**, but things weren’t all that rosy. If we pay attention to what’s happening behind the scenes, we get a real sense that the Biblical writers understood that there was something inherently tragic about the world, both the world the Israelites lived in and the world into which Jesus was baptized. And just because we are God’s beloved children and precious in God’s sight, we are not immune to those tragedies, nor are we supposed to look the other way.

First, Isaiah. “Do not fear,” God tells the Israelites, “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. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned.” Notice God doesn’t assure the people that everything will be alright; God doesn’t assure them they will be immune from tragedies, but God does assure them that they have no reason to fear because God is with them.

At Jesus's baptism, we hear a similar message. Now if you read along in your pew Bible, you know that the lectionary left out some verses. In fact, they left out the good stuff about how John was arrested and went to prison, which creates all sorts of eyebrow raising questions like, "Why would Jesus go to an ex-con to be baptized?" It's a big enough question to simply ask why would Jesus be baptized by John, who proclaimed a baptism for the repentance of sins-which leads to the question, if Jesus was sinless why did he go to John? But now on top of it we hear that John was an ex-convict? I think the lectionary editors think it's too much information for people to hear and that's why they left it out.

Here's the back story: John preached in Galilee, where Herod was the ruler; this Herod is the son of the Herod who ruled at the time of Jesus's birth, the one we hear about in the Epiphany story. Herod #2 was living with his brother's wife, which was a no-no, and John had no problem telling people that. John also had no problem telling people about all the evil things Herod was doing (the apple doesn't fall far from the tree). Well, you know, apparently John never got the memo that sometimes it's best to keep your mouth shut. So in return for his truth-telling, Herod threw John in jail. That's the juicy stuff that happens in the part you didn't hear.

But we're still left with the question why did Jesus go to John to be baptized? Well, some scholars will tell you that Jesus went to John to be baptized to show his solidarity with the sinners of the world. And I think this is true. But I also think there is more to it than that. I think Jesus was also fully acknowledging that there is something tragic about the world, and he acknowledged that tragedy by going to John, who was arrested because he spoke the truth about power, and he spoke the truth to power.

You see, in both of our stories today, there is a recognition that all is not right with the world. All is not right in the world of the Israelites who are exiles in Babylon. They had every reason to ask God, if you're with us, why are we living in Babylon? If you're with us, why are we so besieged

by crime, war, poverty, and hunger? If you're with us, why do we feel so alienated and isolated?

And all is not right in the world into which Jesus was baptized. The rulers of Jesus' day: Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, and Philip were awful people. They had no problem killing people and throwing people into jail for no reason whatsoever. This was the world into which Jesus was baptized.

But this is also the world in which God called the people and told them not to be afraid, and called Jesus his beloved son, and told the Israelites they were precious in his sight. And so, into this note of tragedy, we hear a promise-not a promise that everything will be OK, not a promise that our baptisms make us immune from the tragedies of the world, but a promise that when we pass through waters, or when we pass through fires, they will not overwhelm us.

Hearing that word "fire" has a different meaning this week, doesn't it? I have a dear friend of 35 years who lives in LA. We've exchanged several texts in our group chat this past week. On Tuesday her Mom had to evacuate her childhood home. "No time to grab anything," she wrote. Thankfully, her home was spared, but as we know, thousands of others were not.

"Air quality is difficult," she wrote. "Schools and communities have burned to the ground." My friend is an assistant superintendent of a school district in the LA area, and she's planning her district's return to school without any idea of whether they will have staff to fill the classrooms. At least 30% of the teachers are displaced, and her district isn't unique. "All districts are impacted," she wrote. "It is devastating. The sky is red and smoky 24/7."

And then she shared a small exchange she had with her middle school-aged son. "We are so lucky and blessed," he said. "Well, yes," she responded. "But remember there are a lot of good, blessed people out there who are going through tragedy right now." *There are a lot of good,*

blessed people who are going through tragedy right now. What an honest theological claim to make . . . because it's true.

Friends, I know there are Christians who believe that baptism is some type of magical force that will leave people invisible to the worst onslaughts of life. But that's simply not true. Maybe this is why every year at this time the church returns to the Jordan River, to remind the magically inclined that the tortured, tempted, betrayed, and executed Jesus was also baptized. His baptism should dispel any magical notion we have that baptism is some sort of holy religious shield that deflects tragedies from coming our way.

In fact, baptism makes just the opposite claim as anticipated by the words from the prophet Isaiah: "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...you are precious in my sight" (Is 43:3-4). Isaiah doesn't say "if" but "when"—when you pass through the waters, the rivers, the fires, and the flames of life. Even then, God promises, "You are precious in my sight." That's the promise Jesus hears at his baptism and through Jesus we hear again at every baptism: the promise that God not only knows us by name, but calls us to wear proudly that God-given baptismal name. And how do we wear that name? By acting in ways that are in keeping with Christ.

In addition to describing the devastation in LA, my friend also wrote this:

"This is a 'look for the helpers' moment. The community support, strength and love are immense. The outpouring of organized food and supplies is solid, and the evacuation centers are full of both victims but also volunteers. Food trucks parked; armies distributing food. People bringing and donating what they can. So, we stay inside and wait to see who else has needs and what we can do while waiting to also see if the winds will shift and bring more destruction or relief."

"Look for the helpers", she said. And who are the helpers? Anyone and everyone, but especially those who are baptized.

John told the people who came to him to be baptized to share, keep no more than they need, to be fair, and to treat others with care. If you have two coats and someone else has none, share. The same with your food, he adds. Share. To the tax collectors, he said “be fair.” “Don’t collect more money than the amount prescribed.” John must have known the tax collectors were prone to skimming off the top. To the soldiers, he said be honest. “Don’t threaten people or falsely accuse them, don’t extort their money, and be happy with what you earn.” John must have known the soldiers grumbled about their job and sometimes abused their power.

Look, I know there are Christians who think baptism is their punched ticket to heaven. I also know there are Christians who have their babies baptized for a nice photo op and then never darken the doors of the church again. I can’t tell you the number of times in my ministry I’ve received an email that essentially says, “We were married in your beautiful church and now we’ve had a baby and would like to have him baptized. Can we schedule something for a Sunday soon? Around noon would be great because we have brunch reservations for 1:00.” I gently tell them that baptism requires something more of us than that.

Our baptisms don’t make us immune from tragedy, but our baptisms do call us to be the helpers for those who are enduring tragedy.

And so it is that once every year, the church stops by the Jordan River, but not for an interesting history lesson about Jesus’s baptism or to gawk at John the Baptist’s peculiar dress and odd eating habits. We stop to remember who we are and who we are called to be through our baptism into Christ. We stop to remember our baptism and give thanks that we are precious in God’s sight. But mostly we stop to remember that our Christian work is not done, not nearly done, until every last human being and every living creature knows that they too are precious in God’s sight.

Amen.

