

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

by Rev. Shelli Williams

January 10, 2010

(First Sunday after the Epiphany)

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



ST. PAUL'S

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Lectionary Texts: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; and Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Isaiah 43:1-7

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. ²When 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. ³For 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. ⁴Because 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. ⁵Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶I 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 – ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Acts 8:14-17

¹⁴Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ¹⁶(for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). ¹⁷Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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."

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and 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."

I. Up Until Now

Over the last few weeks, our lectionary has taken us through the announcement and birth of Jesus. We are familiar with those stories of mangers and shepherds and magi as Jesus miraculously breaks forth into a world that seems to have no room for him. And this year, we even had a small peek into Jesus' childhood with the story of Jesus' visit to the temple. So each and every year we listen to these passages read and sung again and again and with an almost childlike awe, we ourselves return to the place of Jesus' birth, light our Christmas Eve candle and hope and pray that this year our faith will be mature enough or big enough or just enough to truly hold what we have been given on this night.

But then the story seems to stop, almost suspended in space until Jesus grows into an adult. We must wait until a wise 30-year-old man emerges onto the scene and begins to make his mark in ministry, and teaching, and healing, and answers his calling to show us the way to God.

The Gospel writer that we know as Luke does a lot of what you could call "expectation-building." It is as if the writer is trying to build to this very moment — birth, growth, and life at its fullest. The passage that we read today from Isaiah put it as creation, formation, and redemption. Now is the time.

II. As the People Were Filled with Expectation...

So, "as the people were filled with expectation," John the Baptist tries to set their thinking straight. He is not the Messiah. They must wait...just a little bit longer.

The truth is, it wasn't just the thirty years before Jesus committed to public ministry that we have waited. It was the centuries upon centuries and ages upon ages that all of Creation had waited for the dawn to break. In essence, Creation has been groaning and straining for this very moment.

Thirty years was, in fact, the traditional time that a rabbi waited to be committed to God. In those 30 years, Jesus would have been caring for his mother, and making a living, and preparing himself for ministry. I don't really think that, contrary to what some may say, Jesus was confused about these roles. He was always serving God. But now...the time had come. And as eternity dawns, Jesus is ready to begin. And so he goes to John at the Jordan to be baptized. And just as each of us received the gift of water in our own Baptism, Jesus kneels in the Jordan and John bends over him and baptizes him. The work has begun.

The writers of the Gospels According to Matthew and Mark both depict that at this moment of Jesus' baptism, the heavens are opened and the Spirit emerges in the form of a dove. The Markan gospel talks about the heavens being "torn," violently ripped apart so that they could not go back together in the same way. In other words, at this moment, God's Spirit on earth becomes present in a brand new way. A new ordering of Creation has begun.

But the writer of Luke takes that same scenario, this spilling out of the heavens, this reordering, and puts it after not only Jesus' baptism but also after the baptism of everyone who was present. It is as if Jesus' baptism is not just the inauguration of Jesus' ministry but rather the beginning of the ministry of all of humanity. It was at that moment that the heavens opened and spilled onto the earth. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. And we hear what the world has always been straining to hear: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Even though the writer of the Gospel has presented Jesus as the Son of God in the birth story, it is not until this moment that the title is actually conferred. This is the moment that all of Creation had been expecting.

III. Now When All the People Were Baptized

So what now?

Now that all the people have been baptized, what next?

We know that Jesus' ministry begins at this point. But what about the rest of us? Many people throughout history have been a bit uncomfortable with the whole

idea of Jesus needing to be baptized. After all, isn't baptism a form of "cleansing," wiping out sin, making us new? Why would Jesus need that? But Jesus didn't really need cleansing. He needed to be changed. He needed to change others. He needed to involve us. He needed to have that entry point into what he was called to do. He needed to go through the act of submitting his own life and emptying himself for God to work in it.

John the Baptist was accustomed to baptizing to mark those who had repented, those who had turned their lives around. But when Jesus was baptized, something else happened. That's the point that the writer of the Acts passage from today is trying to make. It's not just saying that baptism marks that you believe. It's changing your life. With Jesus' baptism, there was a shift in its understanding from human action to God's. Baptism is a sign of God's presence and activity. (That's the reason we only do it once; it's not just about us.) Baptism is a sign of newness, a sign that the former things have truly passed away. Baptism is not something that we do. So Jesus could not do his own. There was no greater or lesser person that day. Jesus just needed to become. He needed to begin. And so do we.

IV. Remember Your Baptism

This story of Jesus' Baptism calls us to remember our own. It, too, is our beginning as the gift of God's grace washes away those things that impede our relationship with God and gives us new birth, new life. And it calls us to do something with our life.

But I actually don't remember the day of my baptism. It happened when I was a little over seven months old, on Palm Sunday, April 15, 1962. It was at First United Methodist Church, Brookshire, Texas, and Rev. Bert Condrey was the officiant. I had a special dress and lots of family present. That would be all I really know. And yet we are reminded to "remember our baptism." What does that mean for those of us who don't? I think "remembering" is something bigger than a chronological recount of our own memories. It is bigger than remembering what we wore or where we stood or who the actual person was who touched our head with or even im-

mersed us in water. It means remembering our very identity, what it is that made us, that collective memory that is part of our tradition, our liturgy, our family.

My grandmother passed away exactly two months ago this morning, almost two months ago this very moment, in fact. And since that time, my parents and I have been combing through papers and belongings and memories trying to sort everything out so that we can move forward. In the last years of her 100-year life, my grandmother had tried desperately to write all of her memories of the stories of her family, my family, moving into Katy in the late 1800's and all of her childhood recollections of growing up on the outskirts of town during the days that the well-known Katy rice farming was just beginning out there, before there was such a thing as roads, before many of the what are now "historic" homes in Katy were built, and when the only school and the only place to worship was the small one-room Stockdick Schoolhouse named for my family. They are memories that I do not have. And yet, going through her notes and trying to compile them into some sort of reflection that will have meaning for all the generations of my family, as well as for the history of that small town, has pulled me into the story. I am now a part of it and it is a part of me. I have been given the gift of "remembering" something that happened long before I came to be.

That is what "remembering" our baptism is. It's not just remembering the moment that we felt that baptismal stream; it is remembering the story into which we entered. It is at that point that the Christian family became our own as we began to become who God intends us to be. And for each of us, whether or not we noticed it, the heavens opened up, spilled out, and the Holy Spirit emerged. And we, too, were conferred with a title. "This is my child, my daughter or son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And in that moment, whether we are infants or older, we are ordained for ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. We are ordained to the work of Christ and the work of Christ's church. Caroline Westerhoff says that "at baptism we are incorporated into Christ's body, infused with Christ's character, and empowered to be Christ's presence in the world. [So then], ministry is not something in particular

that we do; it is what we are about in everything we do.”¹ In other words, our own Baptism sweeps us into that dawn that Jesus began. And, like Jesus, our own Baptism calls us and empowers us to empty ourselves before God. As we begin to find ourselves standing in those waters with Christ, we also find ourselves ready to be followers of Christ.

V. Now...

“Remember your Baptism.” Martin Luther said that “A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued.” It is remembering every single day who we are, whose we are, and how beloved we are. God has made something new. But we have to be willing to let go of the old. Nelle Morton said that “you are destined to fly, but that cocoon has got to go.” So, let go. Then...the journey begins. You are part of something beyond yourself, beyond what you know, and beyond what you can remember. Rainer Maria Rilke once said that “the future enters into us, in order to transform itself in us, long before it happens.” Your past now reaches far back before you were here and your future is being transformed and redeemed in you even as we speak.

Jesus was still wet with water after John had baptized him when he stood to enter his ministry in full submission to God. As he stood in the Jordan and the heavens spilled into the earth, all of humanity stood with him. We now stand, wet with those same waters, as we, too, are called into ministry in the name of Christ. As we emerge, we feel a cool refreshing breeze of new life. Breathe in. It will be with you always. Submit your life, empty yourself, so that there will finally be room for Christ in this world. Then...it is up to you to finish the story. This day and every day, remember your baptism, remember that you are a daughter or son of God with whom God is well pleased and be thankful.

(Endnotes)

¹Caroline A. Westerhoff, *Calling: A Song for the Baptized*, (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1994), xi.