

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, January 12, 2025

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As we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer. Let's pray together.

Spirit, as you fell upon Jesus, the Christ, at his baptism, fall fresh upon us this day. Fall fresh and bring your peace that we might hear what it is you have to speak to us, and that in hearing we might respond. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We continue as we began last week in the Gospel of Luke. We're in the third chapter this morning, verses 1-6 and then 15-22. I've made some selections in there.

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*

*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his paths straight.*

*Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth,*

*and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”*

*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 strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire....*

*So with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people....*

*Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the bodily form of a dove. And a voice came from Heaven, “You are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.”*

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

I have baptized tens of babies at that baptismal font over the last four years. We're getting close to 100, actually, right, with Covid baptisms and otherwise. Every time that I've stood at that baptismal font and I'm sure many, many, many times prior to that, the same liturgy has been read. It's a liturgy that is born out of our Book of Common Worship. If y'all are not Presbyterians by birth, you might not have heard of it. We have a book similar to what Episcopalians have and Catholics have. It's a book that helps lead us in our liturgy. but you don't have it in your pews there. But we use it as pastors and as those preparing liturgy. It gives us words to speak at really important moments in the life of the Church. It shares confessional prayers with us or even calls to confession. There're Prayers of God's People in that book, all sorts of different things that are tailored to the particular liturgical season. We can go to that resource and find all sorts of things. In the baptismal liturgy there are a couple different options. You can choose a different prayer here or some different wording here. Wording that I've used every single time and that's probably been used many, many times before is right there after the explanation of why it is we do baptism using the words of Jesus himself. We make this request. Actually, we proclaim a call to the gathered masses, to you, the congregation. We say, "Let us remember with joy our own baptisms as we celebrate this sacrament today." Many of you have been baptized. Some of you have not. Some of you have passed through waters at this font, or maybe at Germantown Baptist you got fully immersed, right; but all of us who have been through the waters, whether it be with sprinkle or with full immersion, we have experienced the same type of Grace. And our hope is that as we celebrate this sacrament with a small child, we might remember together. There's a word in there, "Remember with joy," our liturgy encourages us. I've wondered about that phrase this week—remembering with joy. I've thought about my baptism at Sardis Presbyterian Church. It's in Charlotte, North Carolina. I don't remember it because it was done eight weeks after I was born. I thought I remembered it, though. I had these memories of that church. There's no way I did actually remember it, but I was in Charlotte not long ago, and I drove past that church. I've talked about it from the pulpit before. I decided to visit. I got to look upon the baptismal font that's been in that church since its construction. It brought me joy.

It seems apt that we would encourage each other to remember with joy the gifts that come in the waters of baptism; but I wondered this week if joy was the only emotion with which we ought to remember our baptisms, if that should be the only invitation that the the one presiding over the baptism brings to the congregation. Maybe we can learn some other responses as well this morning by noticing some things in the text. Notice first that amongst the long lectionary text that we are given today, and to be sure I cut out half of the verses for us just to have it at this length, the most important part of the story. It's buried right there in the last few verses. The

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---

Gospel of Luke doesn't say much about who baptized Jesus besides the long runup with John. We assume it was John, but it kind of passes over it pretty quickly. "Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized...Jesus also had been baptized." He was just one of all the other people. "When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice from heaven (and this is the critical part) a voice from Heaven came, and that voice said you are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." The most significant event in the text comes at the very end, and it's not that a dove descends in bodily form, although that's pretty amazing. It is the claim that is made upon Jesus's identity. The voice comes from heaven and says, "This is my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." In that moment Christ's identity becomes apparent to those who hear. He's passed through the waters with all the rest of them, but it was when he was praying that the heavens opened and a voice spoke. Just as he was baptized and he's praying, his identity is established. Jesus was God's beloved Son.

But notice that the announcement doesn't actually establish his identity. It simply makes the people aware of it. Jesus was God's beloved Son before the spirit descended like a dove. Instead it makes known to all those Christ's truest identity, and the same is true for us. The waters do not establish our belovedness in God's sight. They simply proclaim it in a community setting. They do not make God love us any more or less. They simply make it known that we are beloved, and that's important because it seems to me that there are many other identities that might jockey for pole position in our lives. Depending on the season all sorts of different identities might try to take first place; and that means that before any of those identities, whether it be coupled or single, orphaned or widowed, wealthy or poor, privileged or persecuted, before any of those identities, our identity is established—beloved children of God. You are a beloved child of God before you are anything else, even those identities that bring you much joy. Before you are a mother or a father, before you are a spouse, before you're an advocate or a lawyer or a pastor or a counselor, you're beloved. Before you are a student on the honor roll or one having to take summer school, before you receive the admittance letter to your dream college or the rejection letter, you're beloved. It's important then that we pay attention to what is happening here in the story, and I wonder if by paying attention we might have some other reaction, maybe not simply joy but maybe in this case a stubbornness. Let us remember with stubbornness our own baptisms as we celebrate this sacrament today. Let us be...let us be stubborn about saying we are beloved in God's sight no matter what other identity is thrust upon us or that we try to claim. Over against any other voices in the world, let us be stubborn that belovedness is the thing that defines us first and foremost before anything else, belovedness in the sight of God.

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Before we can claim that love, notice also the work that is happening in this text. All Jesus does and all those other people do is come to the water. It is something else entirely that takes over when they are there. That power descends in bodily form like a dove, because it turns out that the work that is going on in those waters, that identity that is being established, is not being done by the person entering the waters. It is being done solely by God. I love how David Lose describes it. He says, “Baptism, then, is wholly God's work. Baptism then is wholly God's work, that we may have confidence that no matter how often we fall short, nothing that we do or fail to do can remove the identity that God conveys to us as a gift. Our relationship with God, that is the one relationship in our lives that we can't screw up, precisely because we did not establish it. Jesus did not ascend to heaven in this baptismal moment. God descended. We can neglect that relationship. We can deny that relationship. We can run away from it. We can ignore it, but we cannot destroy it, for God's love...God loves us too deeply and completely to ever let us go. To be claimed by God as God's Own is to be the recipient of work that was not ours to do. It was God's.”

The early church reformer Martin Luther often despaired about the difficulties of trying to live a faithful life in Jesus Christ. Whenever Luther was driven to despair by his own lack of virtue, imagining that it was his work that he was supposed to uphold, his failures or his guilt that would separate him from the love of God, he said he had one solution. Luther said, “I crawl back to my baptism.” He would crawl back, he said, to the starting point of it all. He would crawl back to the place where he would be reminded that he was a beloved child of God, not through his own efforts but solely by the work and Grace of the Holy Spirit. That sounds stubborn to me—being unwilling to yield to any other identity, but it's also hopeful there. Perhaps, we should remember with hope our own baptisms as we celebrate this sacrament today, because what it means is that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and the baptism waters convey that to us. That's what we do when we are invited to remember our baptisms. We claim that truth. We were called together, whether we can recall the actual event or not. We were called together whose we are and to whom we shall return. We remember together that we are indeed beloved children of God, called...called that by our creator. It's a hopeful word.

Notice finally, since we began at the end of the text, let us go to the beginning. Notice the hopeful stubbornness that comes from the prophet John. The text speaks of the word of the Lord coming to John. That's important because it places him then in a long line of prophets who precede the Messiah, but in this particular instance the author of Luke Acts wants us to know something specific. John is the one of which the prophet Isaiah has spoken. John is the one who is a voice crying in the wilderness, and the voice is crying this. “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight,” but he's not just giving an instruction. The prophet is giving a vision for

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---

what will be. “Every valley shall be filled. Every mountain and hill shall be made low. The crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” John is saying... John is saying that as he proclaims it about Jesus, Jesus is the one who will fill every valley. Jesus is the one who will make every mountain and hill low. Jesus is the one who shall make the crooked way straight and the rough way smooth. Jesus is the one who will reveal the salvation of God to all flesh. And that becomes stubbornly hopeful as well in the world and in our lives, because that means when we look upon the world, and we see valleys that seem too dark and deep for us to navigate, there is one who fills them. And when we look upon mountains and hills that seem too high for us to climb, there is one that makes them low. And when we look upon our lives and the world and we see places that look way too crooked to navigate, there is one that makes them straight. And when we look upon our path, and it feels like it's too rough for us to move forward on, there is one that makes it smooth. It is not the prophet. It is the one of whom prophecy has been written. It is the one who comes to the waters, that upon being baptized and praying, the heavens open and a dove descends. It is the one that is called beloved so that we might be called beloved as well. It is the one who helps us to remember the sacrament with joy but also some stubborn hopefulness that in these waters is a type of love that cannot be defeated. In these waters is a type of love that is working within you today and in the world. In these waters your identity is set and cast. It is beloved in the sight of God. So may we remember with joy, remember with stubbornness, remember with hopefulness our own baptisms as we celebrate the baptism of Our Lord this day.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.