

## Connected & Held in Love

Baptism of Our Lord  
Tweed

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### First Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7

*Near the end of Israel's exile in Babylon, God promises to bring the people home. They need no longer be afraid, because the one who formed, created, & called them by name now redeems them from all their enemies. God declares them precious & honored, & God loves them.*

<sup>1</sup>But now thus says the Lord, the one who created you, O Jacob, the one who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; & through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, & the flame shall not consume you. <sup>3</sup>For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia & Seba in exchange for you. <sup>4</sup>Because you are precious in my sight, & honored, & I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. <sup>5</sup>Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, & from the west I will gather you; <sup>6</sup>I will say to the north, "Give them up," & to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away & my daughters from the end of the earth <sup>7</sup>everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed & made."

### Gospel: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

*The reading opens with questions about the identity of the Messiah. John the Baptist insists that he is not the Messiah; instead, he points ahead to one who is coming. & whether the voice of God was heard by all or only by Jesus, God settles the matter: Jesus is God's beloved Son.*

<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, & all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit & fire. <sup>17</sup>With a winnowing fork is in hand, he will clear the threshing floor & gather the wheat into his granary, burning the chaff with unquenchable fire." <sup>21</sup>Now when all the people were baptized, & when Jesus also had been baptized & was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>& the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.

& a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

## **Introduction**

Today’s festival rejoices in God’s blessings. We recall & celebrate our adoption as God’s children, the gift of the Holy Spirit, & the promised company of almighty God when we “pass through the waters . . . the rivers . . . fire.” On this day the heavens open again for this assembly, & we receive the gift of God’s Beloved, Jesus, in bread & wine.

## **The Voice of God**

Are you longing to hear God’s voice? What would it be like to hear God call you by name? For many it seems that God spoke to people long ago & far away, but now in this time & place God’s voice is much less clear & less audible. Perhaps we cannot hear the voice of God because our world is full of noise? Perhaps we’re not open to the particular frequency in which God chooses to call us? Perhaps we continually tune out this heavenly summons with our daily rush, not taking the time to quiet ourselves, our minds, our inner voices. We can use this time after Epiphany to clear out a corner of our lives for quiet prayer, meditation, or centering. Maybe then we will be able to hear . . . to sense . . . to listen.

## **Theological Reflection**

The voice of God from heaven speaks a word of truth over Jesus that is spoken over all who are baptized: “You are my [child], the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). Two things are made clear in this declaration. 1<sup>st</sup>, you are the object of God’s love; your status is that of “beloved,” which means you are dearly loved by God. You are dear to the heart of God. Second, God is well pleased with you. These declarations do not come about because of anything you do, but simply because God wants to remind you of what is already yours.

## **Theological Reflection**

John has some seemingly harsh words for the crowds in Luke 3:17. Unfortunately, his words are frequently translated in the same way as Jesus’ parable of the sheep & goats (Matt. 25:31-46): often wheat & chaff are interpreted as two different kinds of people—like the sheep & goats in Matthew’s parable. Chaff is the husk that surrounds the part of the wheat that is good for food; the chaff is the unusable part that does not bring any nourishment. But they are part of the same stalk. John’s warning here is that the unnourishing or sinful parts of us will be burned away. John’s message

is *good news*! God is doing the work of purifying God's people so we can nourish the world.

## **Theological Reflection**

Baptism provides an identity grounding human worth in God's claims over human lives. Humans are lovable because God loves them, not because they have accomplished great things, or even average things. Much like a congregation's mission statement, baptism can help provide clarity around important decisions. "I am Marisol, beloved of Jesus, serving.' This statement recognizes who Marisol is. . . . 'Beloved of Jesus' recognizes her baptism & the loving grace of the cross. . . . This mission statement brings clarity to who Marisol is, what she does, & how she makes decisions".

### **Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

At the beginning of the year we commemorate both Jesus' baptism & our own. Many religious communities, including 1<sup>st</sup> century Qumran, conducted water rituals to signify the old life is washed away & a new person born. In 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism, water rituals prepared participants for the last day, & 2<sup>nd</sup> century converts to Judaism were baptized. As well, devout Jewish males immersed themselves before each Sabbath & Jewish wives immersed themselves after each menstrual period. Christians continued the practice of water rituals, & in Jesus' baptism narrative, tied baptism to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit & divine adoption. The OT often depicts the presence of God with fire. Luke minimizes the account of Jesus' baptism & does not explicitly name John as the baptizer, perhaps since the early church was conflicted about why Jesus had to be baptized. By "the heaven was opened" Luke repeats eschatological imagery about the coming of the messiah.

### **Isaiah 43:1-7**

Probably written about 550 bce, what scholars call 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah is addressed to the Israelites in light of the suffering of the exile. God is called Redeemer repeatedly in this passage: a redeemer was one who bought back a relative or property that had been sold to repay a debt. Just as God had redeemed Israel from Egypt, now God promises to redeem the people from Babylon. The Redeemer is also the Creator. Most surprisingly, these people can be called by God's name, which in Jewish tradition is unspeakably holy. The poem from 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah is chosen because of its imagery of water, its proclamation of the love of God, its familial language, & the reference to being called by God's name. In baptism, we are washed, we receive God's love, we become sons & daughters, & we are called by the name of Christ. These ideas are echoed in Luke's account of Jesus' baptism.