

The Spirit of God redeems and restores.

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-22

Some rhetorical questions for you: Have you ever felt overwhelmed? Have you ever felt that the world has taken all that you have to give and that you have nothing left? Have you ever felt angry at something that has taken place in our world? Have you ever felt empty – almost like you’ve been abandoned or left behind? Have you ever felt guilt or felt condemned by the world? Do you long to feel at peace, to feel whole and to feel that you belong and are loved? If your answer is yes, then you are in the right place right now.

The scriptures today are very clear. God has heard your cries, our longings, and God will protect us all. God will comfort you and love you, for God has created you. Thus you need not fear, for God knows you and loves you for who you are. Hear these words from Isaiah again, when it says: “Do not fear for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, and you are mine... Because you are precious in my sight and honoured, I love you.”

God redeems the people. God heals the people. God reclaims the people, and God rescues people from persecution, from oppression, and from harm. The references in Isaiah of the waters are the promise that God will ensure that the water will never overwhelm the people. This imagery reminds us of the moment when the Israelite people were taken from Egypt to the promised land, where God, through Moses, parted the sea so that they could pass by safely. The fires that Isaiah speaks of that will not consume are a reflection of the story of Moses who saw God in a burning bush. But the bush was not consumed, nor was Moses harmed. The prophet Isaiah in this passage is reminding the people of their deliverance and their redemption. God reminds the people that it was God who created them, formed them, and because of this, God would not abandon them.

This prophecy is then paired with the story of Jesus’ baptism. In the United Church of Canada, “we believe that baptism signifies the nurturing, sustaining and transforming power of God’s love and our grateful response to that grace.”¹ Baptism is one of two sacraments, and it is a ritual that shows our commitment and it also helps us to know that we belong. We are part of

¹ A Song of Faith, The United Church of Canada 2006.

God. Baptism is a rite and a ritual that states that we do belong to God and we are part of something that is greater than ourselves.

Jesus came this day to be baptized by John the Baptist. Now, John had been baptizing people for quite a while at this point. And this is the day that we remember and we celebrate Jesus' conscious commitment to serve God's purpose, which is publicly expressed in his baptism by John. This truly is the moment of the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

I'm going to invite us to do a bit of imagining. So, if you are willing, I invite you to close your eyes for a minute and imagine the following:

Imagine that you are standing in the River Jordan. Feel the water seeping into your clothes and lapping gently around your legs. Feel the sun shining down on you. Now imagine that you are John the Baptist. You see Jesus approaching you and you know deep down in your heart that he is the Chosen One. This is the person that God has sent to transform the world into being the kingdom of God for all of creation. What is going through your head in this moment as you see Jesus approaching you? How do you feel when Jesus looks at you and asks *you* to baptize him? Do you feel as John did: unworthy for this task? Perhaps you think, "Wait, Jesus should be the one baptizing me, not the other way around." But then Jesus looks deep into your eyes and insists that you are the one to do this. As the water that is in your hands pours over the top of Jesus' head, you stand together in the river that is both gentle and strong, and you feel God's unending love and strength around you. The Spirit flows through your body and soon your feelings of inadequacy begin to wash away. Your feelings of regret and guilt change and transform into hope as the water trickles down your hands onto Jesus. And as this water flows onto Jesus, you repeat in your head, "I am an instrument of God's love. Use me, O God, to do Your will here on earth. God have mercy; Christ have mercy." And as you look upon Jesus again, you realize that you have been part of the revealing of God's love in the world.

I invite you back into our space. When we celebrate the baptism of Christ in the River Jordan, we recognize that we ourselves are also asked to turn away from everything that thwarts holy love's possibilities. We are being called in this moment to love. To learn how to love as Jesus loved.

Luke's version of the baptism of Jesus is quite different from that of Matthew and Mark. What I find interesting about Luke's version in comparison of the others is that for Luke, Jesus' baptism clearly takes place after everyone else has been baptized. In other words, Jesus stands, gathers at the river, just like everyone else, waiting patiently for his turn. He isn't expecting any special treatment; he doesn't want to be treated like a star rolling out the red carpet. The other thing that is interesting and unique about Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus is that the idea of judgement and fire and righteousness are absent. The baptism, according to Luke, is uniquely

characterized by prayer, and a heavenly declaration clearly marking the end of the ministry of John and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It comes without great fanfare. Jesus' baptism in Luke's gospel does not set him apart from everyone else, but places him right in the midst of all humanity. With every person, just like you and me. We are all worthy. We are all called.

When we enter a faith community, we contemplate what it means to belong, what's required of us. Will we be welcomed? Will we be accepted? Like Jesus standing in line with everyone else, we too will be welcomed with open arms. We believe at Robertson-Wesley that your presence is enough. There are no other requirements to participating in the life, the mission, and the ministry here at the church. Your presence, the fact that God created you, is enough. Each of you are unique and bring something unique to this community that will change us and help to transform this world.

When we believe in Jesus and acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah and the Christ, it helps us to know that we are not alone. Jesus is the one who liberates all who are oppressed, and we are to be part of this. Jesus shows us what it means to belong and be accepted. Jesus redeems us and heals us, and Jesus will walk with us when we feel overwhelmed. Jesus came to serve and not be served. Jesus came to comfort all of us in our suffering. So when we believe and when we remember our baptism, we are baptized as part of a movement. A movement that works towards healing and reconciliation and the restoration of all creation. Each of us is part of this movement that welcomes all people to commune with one another. Where we are fed, where we are forgiven, and where we are loved.

How will you remember your baptism today? How will the baptism waters restore your soul as you trust in the promise that God will not let any waters overwhelm you or fire consume you? For God is with you always. You are a beloved child of God and you are loved. For this, we give God thanks. Amen.