

## **Precious and Beloved**

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

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### *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. 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. For 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. Because 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. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I 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— everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

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

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 thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His 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."

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

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In 1961, at the height of the Cold War, the Berlin Wall was erected and divided Germany both physically and ideologically. The political violence, the emotions of separated families and the stark differences in lifestyle were well known global news stories. By the late 1980's there was growing anti-Wall sentiment in Europe and beyond, including two rock concerts with international musicians, and President Reagan's bold and famous words, "Tear down this wall." The wall finally came down in Nov. 1989, an emotional, joyous event that was seen live around the world, and making all who saw it eyewitnesses to one of the most pivotal scenes of our lifetime. The cameras and the media allowed us all to bear witness to the fall as the crumbled wall became a symbol for freedom and the unification of people.

Closer to home, and more recent, Smith Church has had an active and involved role with Family Promise to provide hospitality and support for homeless families as they work to better their lives and situations. Spending time with the families in the program, bringing and sharing meals together, spending a night in the Dubben House as a host and supporting the program itself, has allowed us to be eyewitnesses to the complicated dynamics of homelessness, and it has

also allowed to celebrate when we see firsthand the graduation and success stories as lives are reclaimed and a family moves into a home.

Seeing a special event firsthand, seeing it unfold in front of our eyes, allows us to bear witness, to be a part of it all. We are not distant readers or hearers; we are immersed in what is happening. When we are witnesses, an event becomes an experience that stays with us, that resonates, that takes on deeper meaning, that can have a more lasting impact. Being a witness, seeing a profound event unfold in real time, has an impact that just seeing, hearing or reading about cannot fully capture. Experience is always something different. There is a depth and richness that only a witness can know, can understand. The abstract cannot do what reality can to our perception, our appreciation, our understanding.

There is a crowd of witnesses in our Gospel lesson, a crowd who unbeknown to them, are about to see and participate in Jesus' baptism, in the revelation of the Son, the Beloved.

The crowd has gathered alongside the Jordan River and there is excitement, expectation, energy and eagerness in the air. They have been hearing about this experience as there has been quite a bit of talk for awhile and now the day, the time, is finally here and they are ready. They know that after today nothing can ever, will ever, be the same again. They will join with so many others in recent times whose lives have been transformed.

They have heard about John, this man who lives in the desert wilderness, who dresses in clothing made of camel hair, who exists on a diet of locusts and honey, whose whole life is centered solely on preparing the way for the Messiah as he preaches and teaches a strange, radical, urgent message. People are drawn to him, to his words, perhaps in part out of curiosity about such a unique, mysterious person, as though he needs to be seen to be believed. Many are drawn by hope as there is rumor and belief that he is the Messiah, although he is adamant that he not even worthy to take on the menial slave task of untying the sandals of the One who is to come.

The crowd hears his words that they must repent, turn away from the wrongs, the sins, the transgressions of their lives and be ready in their hearts and minds for the coming of the Messiah who will soon be in their midst, who will bring redemption and forgiveness. The generations long wait is over for the Redeemer. He is among them, just waiting to be revealed. The slate will be wiped clean for those who are ready, those who are prepared.

With a desire and willingness to accept John's teaching, to prepare themselves body and soul for the Messiah, one by one they come to the water's edge where John takes them by the hand, and together they wade into waist deep water. He speaks brief words of repentance and grace over them and then leans them back, immersing them in the waters of baptism, immersing them in the coming of the Messiah, immersing them into a new life, a new way of being. John lifts them up and they walk to the shore as the next person comes to John's waiting hand. They each rise looking no different---soaking wet--but not different. Yet inwardly they are new. They are purified and prepared.

On this one particular day, when each of them had been baptized, there was one young man, about 30 years old, praying to God. It may have been quite a common practice to offer prayer to God after receiving the gifts and grace of baptism, but what happened next to this young man was something unbelievable, something breath-taking and seemingly impossible as suddenly the heavens opened as rays of bright light burst through and shone directly on him. A dove gracefully descended through the rays of light and gently rested on his head.

The eyewitness crowd was stunned, dazed. There were perhaps a few gasps and murmurs, and certainly some bewildered silence. Before they could even begin to comprehend just what they were seeing, a voice, a loud yet tender voice, spoke from heaven.

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

We can only guess, only speculate, what this moment was like for those who had been baptized with Jesus and then bore witness to God’s revelation that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the One they had been waiting and preparing for. Up until that moment, Jesus was one of them. He was just one more person who had come to hear John’s incredible message and be baptized until unexpectedly, suddenly, boldly, he is revealed by God and the Holy Spirit as the longed-for Messiah. God Incarnate, Emmanuel, God-with-us, has just had another very human experience.

What did the crowd take away with them that day? What burned within them for the rest of their lives? How did they comprehend, process and respond to what was beyond any imagination as God stood in their midst—looking, acting just as they did—yet was God in flesh and blood?

This passage in the Gospel of Luke opens with the unsuspecting crowd who are receptive to the inbreaking of God’s work and leads us to these questions which have no answers.

“As the people were filled with expectation.....Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...”

What matters to Luke are the people, as our crowd of witnesses stand in for all of us who become baptized into Christ, all of us who are also precious and beloved, who are reconciled to God, united to Jesus Christ and given into his ministry, his life, death and resurrection.

John Shea, in his book, *Gospel Light*<sup>i</sup>, offers insight into why Jesus as one of the crowd before his baptism is so important. “Jesus is baptized with all the people. It is a singular event in his life, but he is not alone. It is not an experience that makes him completely different from the other people in the water. He is participating in the dynamics that affect ‘all the people.’ ... He was in the water with us.”

We have been called by name, we are God’s beloved and precious. As we live out our baptismal promises—promises to follow the ways of Jesus Christ, renouncing evil and desiring the freedom of new life in Christ--we are bearing lifelong witness—eyewitness—that we rise out of the water as precious and beloved, and into full Christian life. We stand in the reality of our faith ancestors, immersed with Christ. Through water at baptism, God takes us by the hand and brings us into the love, care and support of Christ’s Church as we share in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and we are never the same again. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Shea, John. *Gospel Light: Jesus Stories for Spiritual Consciousness*. The Crossroads Publishing Co, NYNY, 2001, pages 98-99