

January 12, 2014 Baptism of Christ

God is doing a new thing. This new thing radically changes the world as we know it. Like last Sunday, this work of God is aimed at our redemption – at getting us back in the embrace of God’s love. It is about the depth and breadth of what it means to be chosen.

Isaiah 42: 1-9

¹Take a good look at my servant.

I’m backing him to the hilt.

He’s the one I chose,

and I couldn’t be more pleased with him.

I’ve bathed him with my Spirit, my *life*.

He’ll set everything right among the nations.

²He won’t call attention to what he does

with loud speeches or gaudy parades.

³He won’t brush aside the bruised and the hurt

and he won’t disregard the small and insignificant,

but he’ll steadily and firmly set things right.

⁴He won’t tire out and quit. He won’t be stopped

until he’s finished his work—to set things right on earth.

Far-flung ocean islands

wait expectantly for his teaching.”

⁵GOD’S Message,

the God who created the cosmos, stretched out the skies,

laid out the earth and all that grows from it,

Who breathes life into earth’s people,

makes them alive with his own life:

⁶I am GOD. I have called you to live right and well.

I have taken responsibility for you, kept you safe.

I have set you among my people to bind them to me,

and provided you as a lighthouse to the nations,

⁷To make a start at bringing people into the open, into light:

opening blind eyes,

releasing prisoners from dungeons,

emptying the dark prisons.

⁸I am GOD. That’s my name.

⁹Take note: The earlier predictions of judgment have been fulfilled.

I’m announcing the new salvation work.

Before it bursts on the scene,

I’m telling you all about it.”

Matthew 3: 13-17

All four Gospels include the story of the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River. This convinces scholars that it is a historical fact. What might not be so obvious to us today is how terribly uncomfortable this passage made Christians feel in the early years of the church. Why would Jesus subject himself to a ritual meant to cleanse away sin when he was without sin? What does baptism really mean?

¹³Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him. ¹⁴John objected, "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not *you!*"

¹⁵But Jesus insisted. "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." So John did it.

¹⁶The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. ¹⁷And along with the Spirit, a voice: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – "I believe... I belong"

About once a month this font sits out here and we have a number of questions and answers printed in our bulletin and we do this ritual, a ritual with words, candles and a gift. In that ritual of baptism we declare a number of things. The parents say to us "I believe" and we acknowledge that they and their children are chosen, beloved and that they belong to God and to us – we welcome them into our family. But I guess the question is how do we know this is true, how do any of us know this is true? How do we explain that it's true? This sense of believing and belonging. I can think back to a July early evening, it was still light out. At the lake. I was 14! I was met by my brother's friend, a handsome 16 year old farmer, a nice Mennonite boy, from the farm behind the farm where our cottage was built on Lake Erie. We went for a walk along the lane at the Wordell's farm and we stopped and he took me in his arms and he kissed me. It was the first real kiss! Do you remember that kiss in your life? It's magical, you never forget it! Not the one that may have been stolen in the cloak room of your grade 2 class. We're going to discount those ones. The first real kiss – what does that feel like? The problem is as soon as you start thinking about it, explaining it is almost impossible. You feel it all over again... the butterflies etc. I have to be honest, at my mother's funeral, we were trying to honour my mother's request, the casket was open before the service for viewing. My sister and I had gone up and looked in, looked at each other and said which one of our dresses does mom not like, *we could hear her*. Then I turned around there was that same fellow, dressed in a lovely navy suit, smiling at me and then the butterflies happened all over again. It's a wonderful thing! When you feel like

that about someone, you have a sense of what your relationship with God can be like. In the early centuries of the church, in the first 1 ½ to 2 centuries, there were a group of Christians called gnostics, coming from the greek word 'gnosis' which means 'knowledge'. This was a very strong and pervasive group within the early Christian church and they argued that everything about faith could be known, so to believe was to acquire knowledge. That worked to a certain extent, you still will encounter people for whom faith is an intellectual pursuit but if you think about that wonderful prophecy of the servant from Isaiah, this person who is going to effect this new thing God is doing, that's going to turn the tables on life, it's going to be somebody who's powerful, not out of military might but out of gentleness, who's going to free the oppressed. All different. It's the same God who says "I'm your God and I've chosen you." And the word 'chosen' in Hebrew can also be translated 'formed'. So we're told in that passage that we are formed by God. And then in the story of Jesus' baptism you are my beloved, I have 'chosen' you, I have 'formed' you. This is the story that we get through scripture and that's not something that you can intellectualize any more than you can your first kiss. It's a challenge to talk about it without sounding a little bit 'coo coo'. To be honest as soon as we start talking about our faith experiences people almost always preface this by saying "I'm really not crazy but this happened to me or that..."

I started to read a book this week. In November I went to a conference put on by the Trinity Institute and it's Trinity Anglican Church right at ground 0 in New York City. At one time they owned all that property which is now Wall Street in New York. They have this big tower and produce some of the best continuing education programs anywhere in the world now. Twice a year they do satellite feeds of their programs so I went to St. John's Cathedral and took part in the fall program. One of the speakers that they had was a fellow that was from the San Francisco area, Derrick Flood, He's a screenwriter, an artist, recently completed his master's degree in systematic theology. He wasn't preparing for ministry, he's a theologian. I was so taken by his presentation, I thought I would get his book and read it and see if it can become the framework for our Lenten services this year. The book is called "Healing the Gospel" and this is what he said, "When I was a teenager I had the typical born again experience complete with all the strong emotions and tears. Only it wasn't typical at all for me, I had not been raised in church. I was an agnostic and so had always assumed that God was just an idea in your head. So to feel God's loving presence, to hear that small voice telling me over and over again, that I was loved and not alone, was simply earth shattering for me. I can hardly express how profoundly it changed me to experience being loved by a God like that. It turned my whole world around." This is the new thing that we have been promised and how you come to believing and how that belief moves from your head to some place much deeper in you, so that you can feel that inexplicable joy that Derrick Flood's talking about. I believe it's true... that first kiss with the butterflies... God happens in the same way. But you cannot determine that you are going to find love on a given day, it won't happen. Often times if you are busy looking for love you'll end up kissing a lot of frogs. But real human love when it happens, changes everything about you. We move from first love to live-long love and some of you are sitting next to the person who you have been with 30, 40, 50 60 years! What does it feel like to love and

be loved by that person? What is your sense of belonging with that person? This is as close as we get in our human experience to appreciating God's love for us. It is deep deep within us and yet it happens. I'm sure I have told you in the past I was dutifully baptized on June 5, 1956, I was born on May 27th, if I had not been baptized on June 5th they would have had to wait until September. I came out of the womb looking like the Pillsbury dough boy and the family baptismal gown was not going to fit me in September and it was obvious. So as a 10 or 11 day old I was baptized in the same church as my parents were baptized and they said "I believe" and as a 12 year old I dutifully went through confirmation and said "I believe". Something happened, and I remember in my first year of University when I was living far away from home and no one was telling me I had to go to church, there were certainly lots going on, on Saturday evenings in residence, mostly involving alcohol and loud parties and Sunday mornings was usually assigned hangover recovery time. The favourite drink was called, Purple Jesus, Welch's grape juice concentrate and alcohol from the Quebec liquor commission just pour it in directly, and if you had enough of that you were praying. Oh I'm probably revealing way too much of my misspent youth. So there I was part way into the first year and that needling sense of wanting to be at church. So I went but not every week and then there was the call, which I had not expected. But since then are those moments in my life when my belief had been so real to me, and you know those moments in your life. Are they true, are they provable, you know if you do something in science the test in science is that somebody else can do the same test and have the same results. We can lose a parent, the break-down of a marriage and we may not experience it the same way at all, we may not find God present with us in that. That's the thing about faith, it's the problem I have with some churches, where they prescribe for people who they have to experience believing. When you believe you must speak in tongues for instance or you must be able to heal people, or whatever it is they say you must do. I'm not sure it always works that way, but when we have those moments of deep intimate personal belief then we know what belonging really means. We can't explain it, we just know it when it happens.

We have these 2 wonderful passages of scripture and they both invite us to revisit those moments in our lives when we have experienced in a powerful life-transforming way, God's word's, "You are my beloved, I have chosen you". Because we'll go through lots of days where we won't feel that at all, when we'll get discouraged, afraid and full of doubt. But the invitation is always to go back to those moments of profound understanding that I believe and I belong and my life is turned upside down in the most wonderful way because of it. We try to mark that with baptism, it's like everything we do as human beings trying to mimic what we imagine the love of God is. I said to people there is no magic power in this, we baptize lots of babies that never ever believe a thing, and I'm convinced of that. God's love in working in them anyway! Because that's the way God is! But we need to take seriously what this water means. As vital as water is for your life, that 60% of your being, that commodity that you have to have every 3 days or you'll die. This is what we are getting in this ritual, you need God to live, you need God's love.

