

*Walking Through Fire*

Baptism of the Lord  
Season of Reconciliation  
January 13, 2013  
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Texts:       Isaiah 43.1-7;  
              Psalm 29;  
              Acts 8.14-17;  
              Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

I remember the first time I heard the new addition to our baptism liturgy. I was worshipping in the Highland Park Reformed Church in NJ on a Sunday between interim ministry positions. Pastor Seth Kaper-Dale took the baby he was baptizing into his arms and before placing any water upon the child's head he looked deep into that baby's eyes and said: "For you Jesus Christ came into the world; for you he died and for you he conquered death; All this he did for you, little one, though you know nothing of it yet. We love because God first loved us." I literally got chills when he said that. I think it was because those words said in that way made more concrete what the sacrament and liturgy have always communicated: that we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own before we can even understand what that means or do anything to deserve it.

When someone is baptized later in life, either as an older child or as an adult, an equally powerful message is communicated: no matter what you have done and no matter how far you have fallen, God still calls you by name and claims you as her own. Despite all the mistakes and failures of your life, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.

I hear the words from Isaiah 43 today in the same vein. God's people in exile were scattered, broken, and defeated. They were used to prophets speaking the word of God; usually a word of warning and judgment. But here a very different tone is struck. The voice of God came to them speaking not about the sins of their past but about the love and power of God that will sustain them through this dark, miserable time.

The prophecy in some ways couldn't be broader. It spoke about God's intention to draw everyone who is called by God's name from every corner of the earth. And yet the words are spoken directly to the heart of the individual. "Do not fear, for I have redeemed YOU; I have called YOU by name; YOU are mine." The promise of this Word from God is particular and concrete. There is mention of the political powers of the day. It alludes to the circumstance of their exile and addresses their specific longing to return to their homeland. And at the same time this Word from God transcends their time and place. We hear the echoes of this passage on the shores of the Jordan as Jesus prays after his baptism and a similar blessing is spoken over him: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It echoes still in this very sanctuary as a word of God's blessing is spoken over you – over me – over every single one of us.

The powerful light of God that we celebrate in this season of Epiphany comes to us especially when we are in the midst of darkness. As Gordon preached last week: "Dusk and dawn, light and darkness are always together."<sup>1</sup> The reason that passages like this one from Isaiah are so striking is precisely because of the persistence of the darkness. We lose track of the voice of God who calls us by name and claims us as his own. The consequences of this forgetfulness are far-reaching. It can move people in different directions but with the same consequence. Some fall into despair and self-loathing, never reaching for the potential that is inherent in the life that God has given them; never finding that joy and sense of peace that comes when we claim our place in this world and participate in creating something good with what we have been given. Others who lose track of God as the One who blesses their life see themselves as the center of the world; over-reaching and grasping after success and possessions as if their worth was tied to such achievement. Talk to people caught in the grind of this over-reaching and they too lack the joy and sense of peace that comes from knowing their proper place in this world.

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<sup>1</sup> From the sermon preached at Hope Church January 6, 2013.

Even Jesus himself needed the clarity of this moment when the Spirit spoke a word of blessing from God as he began his ministry. He needed this not because his sense of identity was so fragile. He needed it because the world into which he was born was fraught with darkness.

I'm indebted to the scholarship of one of my former professors from Princeton Theological Seminary, Dr. Carol Lakey Hess, for reading this passage from Luke in this way. She noted that the baptism of Jesus is told in Luke's gospel just before the genealogy of Jesus is shared and that the genealogy leads directly into the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert. By placing the baptism of Jesus just before a genealogy that lists a whole cast of characters in need of repentance, Luke is making clear that Jesus was born from and into a world that is systemically broken<sup>2</sup>. Going directly from baptism and genealogy into temptation makes the case that Jesus cannot avoid entanglement with the brokenness of life. And the best part of how Dr. Hess' reads this passage is her claim that "By accepting John's baptism, Jesus refuted John's dualism between the wheat and the chaff (v17)."<sup>3</sup>

John expected Jesus to be a zealot like himself with clear delineations between those who are good and righteousness (the wheat) and those who are fallen and evil (the chaff). When you see the world in those stark categories, purity and truth become your driving force. You cannot abide failure. You cannot tolerate ambiguity. You cannot risk contamination. When Jesus was baptized, he made clear that he was fully part of us. He was engaged in the totality of life and would walk in the same shadows under which we all live. During his prayer after his baptism the gift of the Holy Spirit descends upon him. That gift would allow him to remain clear about his own belovedness *and* about the belovedness of those whom John saw as chaff.

You can see how these themes from God's Word today form a ground for our Season of Reconciliation. When you recognize your own intrinsic worth because of who you are before God then you have to acknowledge the same for

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<sup>2</sup> Carol Lakey Hess, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 238-240.

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each and every person you encounter. That sets us on lifelong path of reconciliation. We are interconnected by virtue of this blessing – this belonging – and every time the bonds between us are broken our task is to find a way to rebuild and restore those connections once again.

I don't know how many of you saw an article that was circulating this past week entitled "Can Forgiveness Play a Role in Criminal Justice"? Paul Tullis published this piece in the January 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the New York Times Magazine. As I was reading the extensive article, even as I was wiping tears from eyes, I could feel hope rising up in me that this work of reconciliation that God has entrusted to us really can be done – in real time – in the face of real pain.

The article tells the true story of how the parents of a girl named Ann who was murdered at the hands of her boyfriend, Connor, in FL in 2011 advocated for the use of a restorative justice process in the place of jury trial. This meant that Ann's parents sat in a room facing Connor and his parents along with the prosecuting attorney and defense attorney. And each one of them got to speak uninterrupted about what had happened and it what it meant to each of them. And at the end of that long and painful conversation they would all suggest how they thought justice could be fulfilled. The prosecuting attorney then took that feedback into consideration in setting the terms for a plea agreement.

Part of the motivation for Ann's parents came while her father, Andy, was sitting vigil by her bedside just before she died. He felt his daughter saying to him in his heart that he needed to forgive Connor. He protested that it was too much to ask. Impossible to do. But he kept hearing his daughter's voice in his mind insisting – forgive him. It was when he was praying that he saw the connection between his daughter and Jesus Christ. In the article he said: "I realized it was not just Ann asking me to forgive Connor, it was Jesus Christ. And I hadn't said no to him before, and I wasn't going to start then. It was just a wave of joy, and I told Ann: 'I will. I will.'

For Ann's mother, Kate, the turning point came when she realized that before this horrific day, she had loved Connor. "She said "I knew that if I defined

Conor by that one moment — as a murderer — I was defining my daughter as a murder victim. And I could not allow that to happen.”

Connor immediately regretted what had occurred that day he shot his girlfriend. He was the one who turned himself in. Participating in the restorative process meant that he had to sit and listen as Ann’s parents at great length described their love for their daughter and the unspeakable pain they were going through now that she was gone. The facilitator commented, “There were no kid gloves, none. It was really, really tough. Way tougher than anything a judge could say.” In some ways the work of reconciliation and forgiveness was a more intense process of walking through fire than a jury trial would have been.

But here the words of Isaiah ring true once again. It isn’t a promise that you will never pass through water or walk through fire. The promise is that you do not go alone. When God walks with you through the waters they do not overwhelm. And when the Spirit accompanies you as you walk through fire it does not consume.

We cannot escape the call to reconciliation. It is the path onto which we are placed the moment we emerge from the waters of our baptism.

But do not fear, says the Lord, for I am with you, I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine.

Thanks be to God!