

**Old Testament Lesson—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."*

**New Testament Lesson—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."*

Unlike most Presbyterians, I got baptized when I was twenty-five years old. It was after I had felt God’s pull to go to seminary (though I didn’t know I wanted to be a pastor at that time).

Back then, I thought: Hey, just in case I end up wanting to become a pastor, I might as well get that process started. In other words, I might as well begin the ordination journey. And, as it turns out...In order to begin that process and become what we call an “inquirer,” you have to be baptized first.

So, I did. I met with the pastor of my home church in South Carolina—talked about it—prayed about it...And on August 22, in the year of our Lord 2010, I was baptized there at McGregor Presbyterian Church.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit—with three gentle, comforting sprinkles of water from the font I was baptized.

I received the sacrament that Sunday with gladness and humility—being welcomed into the family of faith with grace and open arms.

Back then, almost fifteen years ago, I didn’t really understand the gift I’d received. To be clear, I’m still learning and I’ll probably never fully grasp what happened that day.

I certainly didn't comprehend just how much it would change me. The Apostle Paul puts it into perspective for us when he writes that, in baptism, we become a new creation in Christ Jesus. Simply put: We are not who we once were. We're not the same person as before.

We are remade—reformed—recreated—refined. We're reborn.

My friends: It's tough to understate just how profound our baptisms are—even more difficult to overstate how much God does through them.

You see: With our baptisms come an ocean of blessings. As we pass through those waters, we are called by God—called into relationship and called to serve God and neighbor.

As we emerge from the waters, we are claimed by God—claimed by our Creator now and forever—with the promise that we'll never be alone—that we are beloved—that in life and in death, we belong to God.

And as those waters wash over us, we are cleansed—now and always cleansed from the stain of sin. We are made clean and made whole by the Holy Spirit.

And as new creations in Christ Jesus, there is nothing in all Creation that can separate us from God's love. As new creations through baptism, we are called, claimed, and cleansed by God, the Fount of Every Blessing.

Isn't it amazing what the Spirit does using just water? I mean, when you think about it, this is what God's always doing, right? God is constantly taking the ordinary things of this world and making them extraordinary—things like bread, and wine, and water—every one of them modern-day miracles in our midst...

God takes those things, blesses them, and recreates them—making them visible signs of an invisible grace. And it doesn't stop there, either!

God takes *us*—ordinary, fallible creatures of flesh and blood—and breathes the Holy Spirit into us. And as the promises of God are made real through the waters of baptism, we become *more* than we were—more than meets the eye. Our bodies, as the Scriptures say, become a Temple of the Living God.

We become part of the Church Universal—grafted into the Body of Christ. Our sufferings and struggles become the Church's sufferings and struggles. Our joys and victories become the Church's joys and victories.

And perhaps most importantly, our hands and feet become Christ's hands and feet in the world. Our work and ministry become an extension of our Savior's own work and ministry!

Friends: These are the everyday miracles happening around us all the time. From the font springs forth second chances, new beginnings, new opportunities, and new life—even, eternal life. You just can't undersell what takes place in those holy moments.

Our Creator blesses and empowers us in those moments; and we're gifted with talents and passions and everything we could ever need to be a blessing to others.

But...here's what I really want us to understand, siblings in Christ: Too often we undersell the wonderful blessing we can be to others. Too often we water down how meaningful our ministries to our neighbors are. Why do we do this?

Why do we doubt our capacities to be change agents and peacemakers and chain breakers? Why do we discount our God-given talents? God knows those talents have the potential to transform the world—that, with a little nurturing, and a little practice, they could bear miraculous fruit! Miracles aren't just a thing of the past—not for Jesus's disciples.

It's time we start believing in ourselves, my friends. Because Christ believes in us. The Holy Spirit is with us. And if God is for us, who is against us?

Because... When I look around the world today, at the start of a new year, I see a mission field that is ripe for harvesting. I see a world desperate for good news and reassurance—desperate for a comforting touch and a warm meal and shelter from the storm. I see a world crying out for new life and second chances and redemption.

I see a world where your baptismal gifts are needed—are required—a world where you better not keep your light hidden away. I'm sorry, but none of us can afford for you to do that.

On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we not only remember and celebrate the blessings given to us, we also remember something equally vital: that with those blessings and gifts come the responsibility to use them wisely—to glorify God by serving our neighbors.

We have a responsibility, now in this new year, to be not just hearers of the Word, but doers of the Word—to not hoard or squander our baptismal gifts, but to pass along those gifts and blessings to those around us.

But I won't pretend the task isn't daunting. I won't act like the responsibility ain't heavy at times. It is, and it can be. Just ask John the Baptist...

You see... I don't think John fully appreciated his own standing in Jesus's eyes. And I certainly don't think John understood the transformative power of his own gifts... not unlike the rest of us today perhaps...

"I'm not worthy," John says. I'm not worthy. I'm not worthy to even touch your shoes, Jesus, much less baptize you!

Of course, John's coming from a place of humility, here. And that's all well and good. But it seems to me he's doing something all of us do far too often... We fail to recognize that it's Christ himself that's called us and empowered us to do hard things. We refuse to acknowledge it's Christ who's made us worthy to minister in his name.

This is not our own doing, but God acting through us. And Scripture is constantly reminding us to recognize Christ's power and to acknowledge God at work in the world...

*Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? What God has joined together, we must not put asunder. What God has made clean, we must not call profane. For nothing will be impossible with God. Oh you, of little faith, why did you doubt?*

Feels a little like I'm picking on John this morning, but I've got to point out something else—one more thing. And again, he's coming from a humble place: I baptize you with water, John says, but one's who coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit...

I baptize you water... just water... just water? As if the Holy Spirit has no role to play there or isn't somehow present in those waters?

I hesitate to say it, y'all, but John the Baptist was wrong!

Siblings in Christ: Though we may not see a dove descend or hear a voice from heaven, I can guarantee you that whenever we're engaged in the ministry of Christ—whenever we utilize our baptismal gifts for the sake of our neighbors, a celebration rings out across heaven! And the angels declare: "This is God's beloved child, and with them God is well pleased!"

You are God's beloved child, and with you God is so very pleased.

I want to close with words from the late priest and theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez: "The neighbor is not he whom I find on my path, but rather he in whose path I place myself, he whom I approach and actively seek."

Now if that doesn't describe the Way of Christ, I don't know what does. If that doesn't encapsulate the power we have to demonstrate the gospel and make disciples, then perhaps nothing does.

Don't neglect your baptismal gifts. Remember we've been called, claimed, and cleansed by our Creator. And we are worthy, not because of anything we've done, but because Christ has made us worthy.

Know that from your gifts, from your ministries, the Holy Spirit is pouring forth—lavishing the world before us with God's grace and goodness.

Be the blessing you are—that we are.

Amen.