

January 9, 2022 | First Sunday of Epiphany

Baptism of our Lord



WONDERING & WANDERING

ISAIAH 43:1-7

As many of you will know, I was visiting my family in a much colder and snowier part of the province over Christmas. Working on this week's service from the dining room table, looking out at all that snow and reading about passing through water in today's Scriptures – it reminded me how, many years ago, I had an American friend visiting from university in winter. I got her to come for a walk with me, out in the woods through the snow. And she was fine, right up until we got to a frozen river we needed to cross. It was the middle of February, very cold for days, so it was perfectly safe – the dog and I took big steps out onto the ice and there was neither creak nor crack beneath our feet. My friend, however, did not take a big step; she tried to slide down the bank and edge out onto the river and, as everyone who's ever walked on frozen water knows, the edges are the dangerous, soft parts. The ice broke under her feet, and in she went.

Luckily, she only got a wet boot, and we went straight home. Not quite the kind of “passing through the waters” that Isaiah was talking about – but stepping boldly forward in faith certainly helps, whether it's out onto frozen rivers or through more liquidy waters.

Now usually, when we come to a passage like this one, I would be drawing your attention to the action words – the verbs – what is happening in what we've read. Not today; today, the good news is to be found in the connecting words, the conjunctions: the whens, the fors, the becauses and the buts. And that makes sense, because both of our Scripture readings – Isaiah's beautiful prophetic poem and the story of Jesus' baptism – are both about relationships – connections that bind and link together.

There is no deeper expression of relationship, no clearer statement of identity and connection, than baptism.

We see it in the Lord's baptism, and we hear it echoed in the evocative imagery of Isaiah's prophecy-poem. In both, God calls and claims by name; and both call and claim together shape what happens after, for Jesus, for God's people in Isaiah's time, and for the Church – for us – today.

The good news really is in the connecting words of Isaiah's prophecy, and so is the tension of what that good news might mean for the people at that time. And both good news and tension are encapsulated in the first two connecting words we read today: "but now."

The first thing that "but now" prompts us to do is look back at what was, the past circumstances and present turning point that Isaiah's prophecy speaks to. Looking back is, well, it's not very pleasant. Isaiah chapter 42 ended badly, with a summary of God's people's history of sin, and what had happened because of it. God's people had wandered very far from him, in every way possible. That spiritual and religious wandering led inevitably to the very literal exile of being taken out of their homeland and away to distant Babylon.

As they sat in exile, God's people did not understand what had happened to them, or why. The consequences of their wandering from God had, to quote Isaiah, "enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand; it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart." And because the people didn't take it to heart, because of their confused inability to understand, they didn't amend or change their ways. Remember Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion [when we remembered home]." They simply sat in despair, believing themselves abandoned and unable to sing the Lord's songs in a foreign land. And there was no word from God – just silence, for many years.

But now, thus says the Lord; but now, at last, God speaks to his people again. But...will it be good news that God speaks to them?

This is the tension – God's people are still in exile, still not changing their ways, still wandered off, in their hearts and minds, far from God and the people he wants them to be. So, yes, God is speaking – but will it be another word of judgement? Condemnation or criticism? A command to wait or amend their ways, before God will say anything further?

No – God's word is none of those things. To his lost and struggling people, God speaks a word of salvation. God says, "you are mine." You might think that I have rejected you forever because you have been there in exile a long time. Having lost everything in the war that displaced you, you might have concluded that you have been cut loose, condemned to be orphans the rest of your life.

But now, the Lord says, "you are mine." You are not forgotten; you are not condemned; you are never abandoned.

Sometimes the word “mine” is spoken selfishly or possessively, like when children battle over a toy or, worse, when nations struggle for resources or territory. Many wars and conflicts and arguments have been started by an aggressive, demanding “mine” from governments and leaders, and between ordinary people, too.

But the word may also be used in loving relationships to indicate a special bond. That’s how God used it at Jesus’ baptism: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And that’s the sense here.

After God’s people’s spiritual wandering, their broken social and religious practices, the deliberate rejection of God and God’s covenant promises by their leaders; after exile, after fear and confusion, God still calls and claims his people: I created you, I formed you, I have redeemed you, and you are mine. Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, says the Lord, I will give anything to restore and re-connect – to redeem – the relationship between my people and myself. You are mine.

Throughout Scripture and over the last two thousand years of Christian history, one of the fascinating and subtle things about the way God works is that he is concerned with us and makes promises to us on two scales: as individuals, and as “God’s people” or as we have been called since Jesus’ day, the Church, with a capital C. And that’s important to remember when we read Isaiah’s words from God for God’s people then, and when we think about both Jesus’ baptism and the meaning of our own baptisms, too.

When Isaiah proclaims God’s words of promise – that his people are created, formed, redeemed by God – it is not strictly-speaking in the Genesis 1, made you each a body and breathed life into it sense. What’s being referred to is the creation of Israel, of God’s people as a community bound together by covenant promise and worship of God, beginning with the call of Abraham and climaxing with the Exodus from Egypt.

In effect, God is saying that he’s created them not just as human beings, but even more as his chosen, covenant people, an identity that they can only live together. The very fact that they continued to exist as a separate people, that could be redeemed, even in exile in Babylon, is a powerful demonstration of that truth.

Remember, from our stories of Nehemiah and Daniel and the three friends in the furnace, that exile in Babylon included having new Babylonian names imposed upon God's people, a suppression of the freedom to pray, as and when they wanted to, dietary changes that went against God's law...and of course the subtler conquest of being given position and power, a personal stake, within Babylonian society. Loss of identity – not knowing who they were anymore, or what god they belonged to – was a genuine danger for God's people, as individuals and together, whilst in exile.

Just as Isaiah reminded the people of God's call and claim upon them, of their identity as God's people, in a similar way, our baptisms establish God's claim on us.

Baptism, whether we experience as infants or children or at any age, enfolds us within a rich embrace of meaning and promise and relationship; but because today is the Sunday when we remember Jesus' baptism as a proclamation of his identity as God's Son, we will take a little time to remember just one part of what baptism means, about how our own identity as individual Christians and as the Church, capital C, is created and formed and redeemed at baptism.

Each of our baptisms was, or will be, the formation of a new family relationship, as we become an adopted child of God. The reason we believe that our ages at baptism don't matter is because we know that, whether we are a year old or a great many years old, at the moment of baptism, we are like new little babies in the faith, newest members of the family, called to grow up into our new identity as a child, and a follower, and a disciple, of Jesus.

But we do not grow up into that identity or live as disciples alone, and this is the other half of that new family relationship: we are a child of God, and we are one of many children of God, sisters and brothers in Christ, in the body of Christ, his Church, capital C, throughout history and into the future, in every place on earth, of which churches like our own St. Andrew's are only one among many.

We can get a bit dewy-eyed and sentimental about baptism, especially when it's a beloved baby or child. But the act of baptism – as important and necessary as it is – is a new beginning, not an end unto itself. It is how we assume and celebrate our new identity as belonging to God.

In effect, it's as though God was saying to us, on our own behalf or for our children, it's as though God were saying: you are mine. Through my Son, I created my Church and formed it, and in Christ's death and resurrection, I redeemed it. Because you, my Church and all its members, are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I will give anything keep that relationship, to keep that connection strong and life-giving.

And in baptism, for ourselves and for our children, we say our amen to that.

Now regrettably, one thing baptism does not do is protect us from suffering and challenge and trouble, like a forcefield or bubble wrap or something. But it does loop us into God's promises, it connects us to God's faithfully-kept vow to be with us. And those promises are so beautifully and wonderfully reiterated by Isaiah for God's people who believed themselves to be abandoned by God: when – not if, 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.

It is reasonable, I think, to ask ourselves, what difference being called and claimed by God makes; certainly, the unbelieving world will ask us that question. Whether the fire and water are literal, as they have been in recent months in many parts of our country and our world; or whether they are images of suffering and challenge, it makes all the difference to know and experience God calling us and claiming us in the midst of it. Like hearing a familiar voice call our name in a crowd of strangers, far from home; like a road sign pointing us toward a familiar town or city when we're in an unknown part of the countryside. But now, the Lord says, that when we pass through the deep water of a spiritual or personal challenge, or the fire of suffering and trouble, he will be with us; even if we think we might drown or burn up, God will call us by name and we will come up, soaking wet and gasping for air, a little singed and smelling of smoke, and God will be there.

We are God's, and we are precious and loved and honoured and valued, so valued that God's own Son came to name us and claim us and redeem us himself, binding us to himself through baptism into his Body, the Church.

As individuals, we might well struggle to know the depth and power of that promise until we have ourselves passed through fire and water. But one thing baptism does do, something that being God's people united in Christ in his Church, does is that we do not actually do anything as individuals, not anymore. We belong with one another, and together, we belong to God.

That's a tricky and challenging point for 21st century people like us; we are accustomed to thinking about ourselves as independent units, constructing our unique identities, making decisions, acting and choosing, holding beliefs and ideas, as individuals, for our own flourishing. Even our religious life, our spiritual journey, is something that, upon reflection, many of us might think of as a personal, private matter, a journey we undertake primarily alone, in the company of God perhaps, for a time; wandering in and out of relationship with various churches and organisations; trying on different practices and habits and expressions of our inner life, to see which one suits us in a particular season; connecting and disconnecting as needed.

Most of that is fine; the only part of that which is not okay is the “primarily alone;” if we are baptised, we are not alone. We have one another, companions with a shared identity as sisters and brothers in Christ, and we walk through that fire and water together, in the presence of God.

I was telling you about my friend and I and the dog, going for a walk in winter, and the trouble my poor American friend got into, trying to step out onto a frozen river. Imagine if she had been alone: perhaps she would have floundered further into the river, under the ice, getting more than a wet boot. She might not have known that packing dry snow around a wet boot will soak up a lot of that freezing water, wicking it away, leaving you with an icy boot but a dry sock. She might not have ventured out on that wintry day at all, and that would have been a shame, because there are few sights more wondrous than the white and blue of deep snow, sparkling as it outlines every branch and twig and fencepost, a serene blanket over a rolling field, illuminated by the sun on a clear, cold February day.

We journey together as one, not as solo travellers and passing acquaintances. We learn how to pass through water and fire from each other, through Christ working through us, as we go. And when we struggle, not if; God will, not might, be with us; God has redeemed us and claimed us and called us, together, his: out of the water of baptism, and through whatever lies ahead of deep water and fire, of challenge and trial, both personal and shared. For God's people in exile, for Jesus in his ministry, for us, the church, today: that call and claim and promise shape what happens next on the journey, into a revelation of Christ present and alive and active in us and between us, and, through us, in the world, then and now and always. Thanks be to God. Amen.