
Love and Baptism

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 12 January 2025
The Baptism of Our Lord

Isaiah 43:1-7 • Acts 8:14-17 • Luke 3:15-17,21-22



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We know that God loves us. We have a beautiful affirmation of this in today's Isaiah reading:

When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you;
your troubles will not overwhelm you.

When you pass through fire, you will not be burned;
the hard trials that come will not hurt you. (Isaiah 43:2)

Our God is a personal God, who loves each of us individually. God's love is like that of a father who loves children. A man may love children in the general sense, but when he becomes a father himself, he loves his own children best. God loves all of us best, which sounds impossible, but it isn't, for all things are possible with God. We are his people, and he created us for his pleasure. He will not forsake us.

But let's look at this passage. God says, "When you pass through deep waters ..."; "when you pass through fire ...". Wait a minute! I don't want to pass through deep waters, and I'd rather not pass through fire, thank you. And what of "hard trials" and "troubles?" God's promise is not that we will have a smooth, comfortable life. Troubles will come: we will get sick sometimes, we will lose friends and relatives; we may often be lonely or sad. As Job said, "Man is born to trouble, just as sparks from a fire fly upward." (Job 5:7) It is inevitable. But the good news is, God will be with us, to help us through. God is both the fair- and the foul-weather friend — with us at all times. Such a presence, such a comfort deserves our thanks and worship.

These words of God, through the prophet Isaiah, were originally heard by the Jewish people in exile from their own land. They had been conquered by the great Babylonian kingdom and taken away from the land of their ancestors, the land which God had given them. This was their punishment for following other gods and not the one true God. A people in exile naturally clings to the memory of better times before their troubles began. They longed to return to Israel. Although it was God himself who caused their exile, it is now God who promises to bring them home again. God goes on (through Isaiah) to tell them that he will save them from their oppressors in Babylon, and will reestablish his people in their own land. Later in the same chapter, God says:

Do not cling to events of the past
or dwell on what happened long ago.

Watch for the new thing I am going to do.
It is happening already—you can see it now!

I will make a road through the wilderness
and give you streams of water there. (Isaiah 43:18-19)

God is always doing a new thing, and all new things come from God.

This is ancient history, but it is our Christian history. God made himself known first to the Jews, and then to the Gentiles. So the Jewish history, as told in the Old Testament, is our history too. It is important because it shows us the nature of our God. God may be angry with us for not keeping our faith; but God will also relent and forgive. We can count on this, even though we are looking at events from long ago, because God does not change. God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. The God which the ancient Jews worshipped and followed is the same one we pray to today.

The depth of God's forgiveness and love for us is shown most importantly in the coming of his Son to redeem us from our sins. The Jews in Jesus' time were under the control of the Roman authorities, and they dreamed of a day when the Messiah would come to free them and restore their kingdom. Why did they expect that this would happen? Because it had happened before, just as these

passages of Isaiah we're looking at foretold. The exiles were returned by God to their own land. The Jews believed that God would not forsake them and that a Saviour would be sent. And so John came, preparing the way for Jesus Christ to come as that Saviour. From our Gospel reading:

People's hopes began to rise, and they began to wonder whether John perhaps might be the Messiah. So John said to all of them, "I baptize you with water, but someone is coming who is much greater than I am ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."
(Luke 3:15-16)

The people rejoiced at the good news, but there was a warning too:

He has his winnowing shovel with him, to thresh out all the grain and gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out.
(Luke 3:17)

The winnowing shovel was used at harvest time to separate the good wheat grain from the rest of the plant, the chaff, in other words. The grain is good and will be saved; the chaff will be burned, as we still burn the refuse from the fields today. God's promise from that long ago time is still the same today: he will save us and love us and care for us, but we must follow him, and not put any other gods before him. The message of love is genuine and can be depended on, but there is a responsibility that goes with it: Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. We must make the choice, to follow God, or not. To be the wheat, or the chaff.

But God does not lightly condemn, and gives us another chance. Thus Jesus came to earth to redeem our sins and bring us back into Communion with God. And John prepared the people of Israel to receive this chance. Many people responded, and were baptised, and then John baptised Jesus. They accepted the word of God, which they had heard through Isaiah and John and others. Jesus, who was human too, like them and like us, also obeyed the word of God, and shared our baptism.

We remember Jesus' baptism today because it was the start of a new phase of his human life. His three years of mission began that day. From that spot, he went out all around Israel, carrying out his Father's will. It was a significant time for him, and for us, who see in his baptism the beginning of our own salvation. From this point on, Jesus' path is set: towards the cross, towards the crucifixion — and towards his Resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.