

AN IMMEASURABLE GIFT

Baptism of Jesus – Cycle C: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

It is not hard to see why the architects of the Revised Common Lectionary, the three-year cycle of readings that stand at the heart of Sunday worship, chose Isaiah 43 as the reading from the Hebrew Bible to complement the feast day we know as the Baptism of Jesus or (more traditionally) the Baptism of Our Lord. So much of what Isaiah declares to the Hebrew exiles in Babylon as God's action on their behalf is what Christians understand to be God's action in Holy Baptism. Speaking for God, Isaiah says to the people of Judah, "I created you, I formed you, I redeemed you, and I named you." And later on, there is reference to God's presence with and protection of these same people – again, something akin to how we regard the work of the Holy Spirit – first in Jesus' life, and then in our own.

The contrast that exists in this morning's First Reading from Isaiah and this morning's Gospel from Luke is not unlike our experience of things that are two-dimensional and things that are three-dimensional. Isaiah's prophecy to the exiles aligns with other proclamations and covenant statements in the Hebrew Bible; and because we are Gentiles, we read these proclamations with interest, but have difficulty hearing them for ourselves: they are two-dimensional. The proclamation of Jesus' baptism, on the other hand is three-dimensional: it connects with us because Gentiles see Jesus at the heart of God's new covenant, God's proclamation in and through Jesus Christ that the God of Israel is the God of all people.

The temptation, of course, is to make Jesus' baptism two-dimensional as well: to say to ourselves, it was his experience, not ours. But if we do so, we overlook the huge shift that takes place when Jesus simply queues up with those coming for baptism in the Jordan. Luke's account of Jesus' baptism is unique in its understatement: Jesus is one among many; and the gift of God's power and presence, signified in the descent of the dove, occurs after his immersion, perhaps even when very few were paying attention. Luke tells us that the Spirit and the naming of Jesus as God's Beloved were given while Jesus was praying, probably in a quiet place. But it is this understatement in Luke's telling of the story that gives what happens to Jesus its vibrancy. Like so much of what we have come to know as the risen life – life redefined by the birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth – the extraordinary is hidden in the ordinary; and that is the power and promise present for us in Jesus' baptism. God is present in our world in a very ordinary human being who is one of us. But that Spirit and that naming, the very things that mediate God's grace in Jesus of Nazareth, are things he shares with us, his sisters and brothers. In Jesus the Beloved, there is a holy transaction that occurs as he gives his life for the saving of the world; as he give his life to us and for us. Our response is to be baptized as well. We are baptized because he was baptized. And in that baptism we begin a lifetime of holy communion; of life with him. It is an immeasurable gift.

Some weeks ago, one of our members was reflecting on how blessed we are in our congregation, and she was naming specific people and specific gifts these people have that give Christ Church its dynamism and propel our mission. I didn't disagree with her, but her comments led me to deeper reflection on who we are as a community of faith. Are we a group of like-minded people? Not by a long shot! Are we a group of people with gifts? Without question! In fact, our whole theology of call is based on identifying gifts in one another for the greater ministry and mission of the church. But the synergy is undeniable: we are more than the sum of our gifts – much more!

Perhaps not surprisingly, my reflection on these things took me to a place much different from where I had begun: I realized that our gifts for ministry and mission are in and of themselves a sign of a greater truth – specifically, the Spirit of the Risen Christ within and among us. Like Jesus' baptism, this congregation presents itself as something quite ordinary – a modest-size suburban Christian faith community; young, only 45 years old. But there is life here, and commitment, and power, and presence. And as much as we would like to take credit or give credit to specific individuals or groups of individuals for what we are able to accomplish together, it is something much greater that has called us into being and that continues to call us to mission and service. It is God in the power of the Holy Spirit, it is Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, it is the gospel of Jesus Christ in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit living among us, within us, in, with, and under us. It is the immeasurable gift, revealed in the baptism of Jesus, and present in every baptism since.

One of the many benefits of our church's new relationship with the Anglican Church of Canada is in our sharing of worship materials, Anglican to Lutheran, and Lutheran to Anglican. It was a few years ago when the Rev. Dana Rodgers, then-priest-in-charge of Saint Columba, pointed out to me a prayer her congregation prayed at the end of every Eucharist. She said to me, "It's a wonderful prayer, especially because it has figured so significantly in the spiritual formation and growth of our people. It reminds us of who we are and how God is present in everything we do. It has changed us!" The prayer goes like this:

Glory to God,
whose power, working in us,
can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.
Glory to God from generation to generation,
in the Church and in Christ Jesus,
for ever and ever. Amen.

One of the great heresies of our time, perhaps of all time, is the faith we have in our own power and the pride we take in human accomplishment, both individually and together. We forget that, as Jesus said to Pilate, we would have no power, had not God given it to us. And now, here is this wonderful prayer reminding us yet again that we are not unto ourselves; that God has created, formed, redeemed, and named us through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. God's presence and power within and among us as those God has named the people of God in Christ Jesus is an immeasurable and amazing gift! We can do nothing but give thanks.