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"Beloved"

Isaiah 42:1-9 Mark 1:4-11 Acts 10:34-43

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 42:1-9

God's chosen servant on whom God's spirit is placed is to perform the task of bringing forth justice to the nations by his own suffering. This servant will bring light to the people who live in darkness. Hear God's word from Isaiah 42:1-9

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 1:4-11

Last Sunday we ordained and installed a new class of elders. They stood before you and answered questions, took vows. You answered questions vowing to support them and pray for them. We all witnessed and participated in a ceremony of laying on of hands and prayer to set them apart for a specific ministry over these next three years. All of us, however, all of us in this room who have been baptized, have taken vows when we joined the church. All of us have been given a message to share, called to a ministry and given a mission. The waters of Baptism not only mark us as a part of God's family, symbolize our cleansing of sin through the grace of God's forgiveness, they commission us. In the Presbyterian Church we emphasize the doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers." We are all commissioned to that priesthood through the sacrament of Baptism. Let us hear from the gospel of Mark the account of Jesus' baptism as he accepts his role of our Great High Priest. Hear the word of the Lord from the gospel of Mark 1:4-11.

Let us pray. Oh Lord, bless to our hearing and increase our understanding of this portion of your Holy Word. Amen

Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, was a very devout Roman Catholic evangelist. One of the stories that grew out of his ministry concerns a time when he was baptizing new converts in a river. He would wade out waist-deep into the water and call out for new Christians to come to him, one by one, to receive the sacrament.

Once he baptized a mountain chieftain. Saint Patrick was holding a staff, called a crosier, in his hands as the new converts made their way to the water. Unfortunately, as he was lowering the chief down under the water three times, he also pressed his staff down into the river bottom. Afterwards the people on the riverbank noticed their chief limp back to shore. Someone explained to Patrick that, as he pressed the wooden staff into the riverbed, he must have also bruised the foot of the chief. Patrick went to the chief at once and asked, "Why did you not cry out when I struck your foot?"

Surprised, the chief answered, "I remembered you telling us about the nails in the cross, and I thought my pain was part of my baptism." (1)

John the Baptist was in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for sins, and all the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside were going out to be baptized by him. Among those who received John's baptism was Jesus from Nazareth

of Galilee. This was a significant milestone in Jesus' life. Until this time his ministry had been centered in the artistry and hard labor of a carpenter. Today we would say that Jesus' ministry was a second career.

Remember the surprise of his family, friends and neighbors when he began his ministry? It is as if he came out of nowhere. Those that had known him all his life said, "What is this? Isn't this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary and his brothers, James, and Joseph, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all this? (Matthew 13:55)

Did you realize that Jesus was one of at least seven siblings? His four brothers are named, and it mentions sisters which means there had to be at least two for them to be referred to in the plural. How would have liked to grow up with Jesus as a brother? How many times would you have heard, "Why can't you be like your brother Jesus?"

In Matthew's account of Jesus' Baptism, John is reluctant to baptize Jesus. Jesus responds by saying "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." What did Jesus mean?

The law of the Old Testament which Jesus was obeying when He was baptized is found in Numbers 8:6-7. "Take the Levites...and cleanse them....Sprinkle the water of purification upon them. The Levites were priests. Jesus Christ was (and is) a priest (Heb. 3:1; 4:14; 5:5; 9:11); Hebrews describes him as our "High Priest forever." *Christ's baptism was the ceremonial act of His ordination to the priesthood. ...done to fulfill all righteousness.*

Before any man could become a priest, three things were required: first, he must be 30 years old (Numbers 4:3,47). This is why Christ's age at His baptism is given as 30 years in Luke 3:23. Second, he must be called of God as was Aaron, the first high priest (Ex. 28:1). (Christ was thus called, Heb. 5:4-10). Third, he must be sprinkled with water (Num. 8:6-7) by one already a priest. John the Baptist was of the priestly line, inheriting the office from his father, Zechariah. (Ex. 29:9; Num. 25:13; Lk. 1:5,13). Jesus knew His call, waited until He was 30 years old and then came to John "to fulfill all righteousness," that is, to meet the last demand of the Old Testament Law for a priest before He began His public ministry.

Jesus had been in the business world, but now at about thirty years of age, he came to be baptized by his cousin John. As he came out of the water he had what we would call a "Mountain top Experience" in a river! He saw a dove descend from heaven and heard his Heavenly Father's voice, 'This is my **beloved son** in whom I am well pleased!"

I did not have that kind of dramatic baptism. I believe I was a **beloved son**, but the words came from my parents, not from a cloud. I've told you before that when I was baptized my mother read Hannah's prayer and dedicated me to the service of the Lord like Hannah did by dedicating her son Samuel. My mom didn't tell me this until I graduated from seminary. She wanted to make sure it took. I had been told I was a miracle child. Recently I was talking to a friend of the family who told me that my

parents had given up on having children of their own and had filled out the papers to adopt when they discovered I was on the way.

Those of us who were baptized as infants have no remembrance of the event. And yet baptism is as significant in our lives ... as it was in Jesus' life.

Baptism tells us at least 3 things. First, Baptism tells us that we have a place in the Family of God. I love the way one little girl described it. Before I give you her description, however, you need to know that out on the cattle ranches of the West the unbranded calves that roam at large are known as "mavericks." They are claimed by the man who is first to get his brand on them at the annual round up. One Sunday a little girl from West Texas had been baptized. Her schoolmates questioned her the next day as to the meaning of the ceremony. "Well," she said, "I will just tell you. I was a little maverick out on the prairie and that man put the Jesus mark on my forehead so that when Jesus sees me He will know that I am one of His children." (2)

Secondly, baptism tells us that our sins can be forgiven. I hope that I don't sound too matter-of-fact when I say that. It is so easy to think to ourselves, "What a deal. I sin, God forgives. I sin, God forgives. I sin, God forgives, etc., ad infinitum."

On the contrary, the forgiveness of God is a costly enterprise. Grace is never cheap. Our sins are vile, destructive acts that bring harm into God's world: harm to ourselves, harm to our families, harm to our friends, harm to our environment, harm to our reputation, harm to character, harm to what it means to be a child of God. But baptism reminds us that those harms can be forgiven.

The waters of baptism symbolize our being cleansed of our sins. We can't be baptized with water every time we sin and ask forgiveness, but through the baptism of the Holy Spirit we can. We are baptized, "marked" with water once, but we can be "cleansed" of our sins every time we repent and seek God's forgiveness through the "baptism," the cleansing of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is a reminder of the great love God has for us, and that because of that love, our sins can be forgiven.

The third thing that baptism tells us is that it is never too late to start over. We don't have to stay where we are. We can begin again. For those of us who have grown up in the church it is easy to take the faith for granted, isn't it? After all, it is like the air we breathe. It's always been there. Baptism reminds us that a fresh experience of God's grace and God's love is always available to us if we seek it.

Think through the centuries of church history to a time not quite 500 years after Christ, to the young man in the north of Africa who led such a wild, riotous life, that even after he decided to become a Christian he refused baptism because there was still some sinning he planned to do, and he wanted to go wild with at least a relatively clear conscience. He made a prayer once in reference to his raucous womanizing; he said, "Lord, make me chaste, but not yet." His name was Augustine, and even though he lived a thousand years before the Reformers, he became the inspiration for the work that they would do to change the church.

One of those who made those changes was Martin Luther, a simple, scholarly priest who would have been much more content in an academic setting, but ended up taking on the whole church to correct massive abuses. John Calvin began his career looking to become a lawyer, but instead became the greatest theologian of the Reformation. William Carey, a humble shoemaker became the father of modern missionary enterprise when he took the gospel to India. John R. Mott, a businessman at the turn of the twentieth century, who was convinced that Christian churches would present a better witness to the world if we could only begin to cooperate from one denomination to the next — it was Mott, a layperson, who became one of the founders of the ecumenical movement.

Then there was the young preacher's son, very ordinary, very fallible, but used of God in an incredible way as he became the messenger to America to call attention to our racism and bigotry. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered for his efforts, but his memory will never die. (3)

Tomorrow, folks will be gathering at the Impact Early College High School at 9:a.m to parade to the Town Square to honor Dr. King's legacy and memory. This will be 4th year to make the parade. I hope some of you will join me.

Last Sunday we ordained and installed four persons to serve as elders, as leaders for this congregation. Over the next 3 years they will have a special role to play in the leadership of our congregation. But long before last Sunday they were given a mission a mission that all of us share. Everyone who is baptized has a message to share, is given a ministry and sent on a mission.

You and I did not see the heavens open on the day we were baptized. We heard no dramatic voice from a cloud. But our baptism is precious to us nonetheless. It tells us we are loved. It tells us we can be forgiven. It tells us that because we can be forgiven we can be given a new beginning. With God's help, may that experience of baptism which sometimes seems so distant in our lives be fresh within our consciousness this day as we participate in the renewal of our baptismal vows and remember our baptism and remember that we too, like Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, St. Patrick and a limping mountain chieftain, William Carey. John R. Mott Martin Luther King Jr. are ...beloved.

Let us pray. Lord thank you for our baptism. Thank you for the Church families that surrounded us at our baptism, and for this family that surrounds us this morning as we renew our baptismal vows.

We thank you for visiting us with your mercy. Your goodness overwhelms us. We come to you in times of need. We rely on you to drive away our doubt.

There are those in our midst whose days are filled with uncertainty. Invade their gloom with the warmth of your loving care. Give them the sense that you are with them. Lift them from feelings of futility and enable them to grasp your abiding love. Give us all a measure of the compassion that Jesus showed to others.

We pray for those on our hearts this morning, for those who wander aimlessly. Give to them a sense of your will for their lives, the strength to pursue it, and the discipline to do what you would have them do. Erase from us our need to be critical of those who do not conform to our standards. Teach us forbearance as they seek to discern your will for them.

We pray for our brothers and sisters in every country. We stand in solidarity with all who have answered the call to follow Jesus and have received the sacrament of baptism that unites us.

Make this day and all our days a celebration of our baptism. Fill us anew with your spirit and cleanse us of past sins which estrange us from You and from one another. Send us forth as Christ's disciples, abounding in the hope of new life and proclaiming good news to all. Amen.

I invite you now to join me in the Reaffirmation of your Baptismal Covenant.

REAFFIRMATION OF THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT

Leader: Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

People: I do.

Leader: Who is your Lord and Savior?

People: Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.

Leader: Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

People: I will, with God's help.

Leader: With the whole church, let us confess our faith.

Leader: Do you believe in God the Father?

People: I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

Leader: Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

People: I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Leader: Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

People: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church; the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen

Now, having reaffirmed your baptismal covenant I invite you, should you or as you feel led, to come forward to the baptismal font. I invite you, should you feel led or as you

feel led to touch the water or to take a stone from the font as a reminder of this day that you reaffirmed the vows that were made on the day you were baptized and marked as one of God's Family that can be forgiven and is called and given a message, a ministry and a mission in this life. As we begin singing "Baptized in Water" let us come to the River of Life, the Fount of Every blessing, the waters of baptism.

(1). Augsburg Sermons 3, (Augsburg, Minneapolis: Gospels, Series C, 1994), p. 193.

(2) *The Evangelical Christian*.

(3) CSS Publishing Company, Inc., Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit, by David E. Leininger