

Spoken in Our Ears

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

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Texts

Isaiah 43:1-7

43:1 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.

43:2 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.

43:3 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.

43:4 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.

43:5 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you;

43:6 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--

43:7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

3:16 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.

3:17 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."

3:21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,

3:22 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."

Prayer

Sermon

Imagine Jesus, a young adult tuned into God's will and the world's needs, getting ready. He's standing on the bank of the river, at a shallow, muddy corner of the Jordan, watching his cousin dunk people into the flowing water. He's watching John offer a baptism of cleansing and forgiveness and repentance. Jesus is standing there, at a turning point from preparation to vocation. Jesus is standing there, with the faith of his ancestors glowing within him, with pressure of Roman occupation pushing against him, with a wilderness to navigate in front of him. And he steps into the water. Luke's

gospel doesn't tell us that it was John who baptized Jesus, but other gospels do, so let's hold on to that detail for a moment. He steps into the water - later folks will think, why would the Messiah, the anointed one, go with the crowd, step into the water to be baptized by John? But Jesus is humbling himself in preparation for all that is to come. And he is dunked, soaked, covered, his toes sinking into the muddy bottom. And he comes back up to the surface, the water dripping down, all sorts of people standing around him, dripping. And maybe he is on his knees, in the mud, we know that he is praying. Jesus is praying - he does that a lot.

And when Jesus also has been baptized and is praying, heaven is opened, the Holy Spirit descends upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice comes from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

There are two ways the gospel writers tell of this moment. Matthew's voice from heaven tells the crowd, *this* is my beloved son. This one, right here, pay attention because this is my son whom I have sent to you. But in Luke's gospel, the voice from heaven *speaks to Jesus*:

"*You* are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

You, who are at the beginning of a ministry of compassion, justice, and faith: you are my child, the beloved.

You, born holy, have chosen to walk this path, have chosen to humble yourself in these waters: you are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.¹

You who are my Word made flesh, here is my word of love, spoken in your ears.

You, who will walk through wilderness, you are my beloved child, you are precious to me.

¹ With thanks to our Bible Study folks for this insight

You, who will travel through storms, walk through fires, wade in the water: I will be with you.

Imagine what it might have meant to Jesus, to hear those words, spoken into his ears, in the waters of the Jordan. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Imagine what it would be like for you to hear these words, spoken into your ears. "You are my child, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Fear not. "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."

The good news of our faith is that these words are spoken into our ears, too. Every one of us, each one of us. Jesus, after all, came to us in the flesh to be God with us, Emmanuel, so that we would never be alone, so that we would know that through the floods, storms, fires, of this life, we are not alone.

Back at the Jordan, with Jesus.

This moment does not make Jesus God's beloved child - this moment empowers Jesus for his God-filled ministry.

There's so much we can take from these two passages. One way I read these two passages is as testimony to the incredible immanence and intimacy of our God, who creates, redeems and sustains us, who calls us by name, who reminds us that we are precious and walks right next to us just at the moment we might feel we are walking through fire.

We say this about the baptisms offered in this church and in the United Church of Christ: The sacrament of baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of God. From the first moments of Creation, God knew and loved each one of us, and that love will never end. We celebrate that love and grace in baptism. The baptized person isn't changed by the words and water - rather, the baptized and their family and the congregation get to celebrate what God has been working on in them. For those who make the decision to be baptized themselves - we rejoice with them and commit to walk with them as a community. For tiny children, we rejoice with and commit to their whole family.

Folks, often on this Sunday, pastors ask their folks to remember their own baptisms, or the vows their parents took on their behalf. But today I'm going to ask you to remember the baptisms you've been witness to, here at Pilgrim, or in another congregation. What vow did you make?

For one recent baptism at Pilgrim we made these promises:

We receive and welcome this child as a new person in Christ. We rejoice in her presence among us, and we support her parents, in the covenant which you have made on her behalf. We enfold her in our love, praying that she will always accept the grace that she has received in baptism, and that together, with her, we shall grow in faith and love.

When have you offered up those words? Maybe today would be a good day to call or write to someone whose baptism you've witnessed - whom you've promised to enfold in love, and just let them know, you're still enfolding them in love. They are not alone.

Friends, we are collectively in a flood of CoVid.

And some of us are in the midst of fire - illness, conflict, tragedy.

But we are not alone.

God is with us, as sure as the words spoken into our ears, and we are with each other.
Thanks be to God. Amen.