

Isaiah 43:1-7
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The Baptism of our Lord C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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The Rev. Karen Haig

Starting Fresh

The Jordan River is murky and sort of greenish. Before I went to see it, before I stood in that river to remember my baptism and renew my baptismal vows, I had always thought of it as a mighty, rushing river, with bright and crystal-clear water like the Skykomish or the Sol Duc or the Columbia. There are places where the Jordan runs hard and fast, but mostly it meanders through Jordan, Palestine, Israel and Syria. Like so many things in the complex and complicated Holy Land, it is forbidden to go into the water in most places... forbidden even to walk down and stand on the riverbank. I imagine that has something to do with all of the religious conflict in the Holy Land, where there are so very many restrictions, so many things forbidden, such a profound effort to keep everyone and everything under control. Best not to let people get too riled up. As you might imagine, for a Christian, standing on the banks of the River Jordan brings up some pretty big feelings. Standing in that river, eyes closed, heart and hands opened, I heard the very words Jesus heard: You are my daughter the beloved. In you I am well pleased.

Many of us were little ones, even babies when we were baptized. I have no recollection of the day of my baptism those many years ago, and that's true for a lot of us. Most of us don't remember being welcomed into the family of God, don't remember being sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own beloved forever. And some of us didn't grow up in families that called us beloved. Some of us didn't have grown-ups around us who told us they were so pleased with us. And that can leave a big hole that many of us spend the rest of our lives trying to fill. Not knowing ourselves as beloved often means no matter what we do, we feel it is never enough. No matter how hard we try, we feel we will never be good enough. And whether we criticize ourselves or we criticize others, it's all the same thing. We don't believe we are actually good enough and so we berate ourselves or we berate others so we can feel "better" about ourselves. But criticism, whether we're criticizing ourselves or anyone else, doesn't do anything to make us feel better. And it surely won't fill up that hole inside of us. We were made from love and for love and our heart's desire is to love and be loved. And still, it is so very hard for us to believe we are God's own beloved. But we are. Baptism reminds us that we, all of us here, all the ones we love, and even the ones we shy away from and find so hard to love, all of us are God's own beloved. When we were baptized God spoke into our lives just as God spoke into Jesus' life at his baptism, reminding us that we are beloved and blessed and welcomed into the priesthood of all believers where all are anointed for our very own ministries in the world.

When I talk with parents who are interested in having their children baptized, I always ask them if they plan to come to church. And while it isn't my intention, that question often provokes nervous non-verbal exchanges between the folks in the room. You see, I've had the great good

fortune to serve only in very beautiful churches, and because that is so, I have frequently found myself sitting with people I've never met before, talking with them about the wedding they want to have in this beautiful church, the funeral they want to have in this beautiful church, or the baptism they want for their baby in this beautiful church. And because I am who I am, it's hard to imagine many circumstances in which I would withhold the sacraments of the church, even when I have a pretty good idea that I'm going to do the wedding, the funeral or the baptism and never see those people again. But my question about becoming a part of the worshipping community, particularly in the case of baptism, is very important. It isn't a question meant to elicit discomfort, guilt, shame or lies. It's a question that speaks directly to the meaning of baptism. When people want their children baptized without any intention of allowing the baptizing community into those children's lives, it's usually because they believe there is some possibility, however remote, that something bad just might happen to their children if they aren't baptized. These are the people who want their children baptized out of any possibility of sin and eternal damnation. And while it is true that when we are baptized, we are washed clean, we aren't so much baptized out of sin and eternal damnation as we are baptized into new life in God. When we go down into the waters of baptism – or in most cases, when we are sprinkled with baptismal water – we die to a life alone, a life without God, a life without each other, and we are born into a new life in God, a new life of God in us, into God's priesthood of all believers, and into a loving community just like this community. When we are baptized into, rather than out of, we are welcomed into a loving community that will remind us day after day, week after week, that we are God's own beloved.

When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan he lined up with every sort of outcast and sinner imaginable. I'm sure there were plenty of well-behaved people there too, but John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, of forgiveness of sins, a baptism that had a lot to do with being washed clean and having a fresh start. It's a little confusing, don't you think, that Jesus would be a part of that? After all, he had nothing to repent of. But there he stood, lined up with everybody else, and as far as we can tell, he didn't even cut in line. *Now when all the people had been baptized and Jesus had also been baptized, that's when God said You are my Son, the beloved, in you I am well pleased.*

I always marvel at this timing. This is the very first thing we hear about Jesus public life and it's the inauguration of his earthly ministry. The inauguration. He hadn't done anything yet. He hadn't, so far as we know, made one miracle, hadn't healed one blind man, paralytic or leper, hadn't done any teaching or preaching or anything else to usher in the Kingdom of God. He just showed up and got in line with everybody else, became like everybody else, became everybody else and apparently that pleased God to no end. Was it his deep connection to God's people that pleased God? Was it his willingness to step into the muddy waters of the River Jordan and go down into those baptismal waters with every other sinner, that pleased God? We're not told, but I can't help believe that Jesus' willingness – no, not willingness – his desire to be a part of all of that spoke of his desire for us to know that we belong to him and with him and that he belongs to us and with us too... I think that made God's heart sing. Jesus came to be God with us

and I think he was baptized that day because he wanted to be right in the middle of all those beautiful sinners who wanted a fresh start, a new way a being and who wanted to take their part in ushering in God's beautiful new Kingdom.

That was how Jesus began his earthly ministry, you know. Dunked in the waters of baptism, surrounded by God's people and utterly beloved. It's the same for us. Our baptism is a beginning, not an end for us. Not only does it begin our new life in Christ, our baptism equips us for our own earthly ministries and reminds us that because we belong to God, because we are beloved of God no matter what we do or don't do, no matter how smart or successful or important we are or are not, we have everything we need to do God's good work in the world. In baptism, we get into the water with all the rest of the outcasts and sinners and believe – or at least try to – in the new start God promises. Every time we renew our baptismal vows we try again to believe that we were utterly beloved of God before we ever said or did anything that was good or special or important or even particularly holy. We are utterly beloved of God and it is that love that equips and empowers us for our own particular ministries and allows us to do our part in God's good work in the world.

In a few minutes, we will renew our own baptismal vows. It's a fresh start with promises and hopes that are all brand new. Hear the questions you will answer and be glad of the opportunity to, with God's help, make those promises. And most importantly of all, hear the voice of God, dear hearts. Hear the voice of God saying you and you and you and you and you... you are God's own beloved. And in you, God is so very, very well pleased. Amen.