

St James United Church



Message for January 12, 2025

Baptism of the Lord Sunday (First Sunday after Epiphany)

“Sealed as God’s Beloved” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-22; and an excerpt from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard

We may have concluded the Christmas season last week as we marked Epiphany Sunday, but we've just heard another reading associated with that day, the account of Jesus' baptism and a revealing of his identity as God's beloved son. As such, today too could be the last Sunday of Christmas, in fact is in Roman Catholic churches, a result of the church calendar being changed in the 1960s. So I'd like to repeat something I said last week about the mystery of the incarnation we celebrate each Christmas: the goal of the incarnation is restoring us to ourselves, reminding us how we too are made in God's image, how all of us are inspirited with God's breath.

This too I believe is the goal of the event in Jesus' life we affirm this morning, how as Jesus was praying after his baptism, heaven opened, the Spirit alighted upon him, and God spoke, saying, “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well-pleased”. We often focus on what this means about Jesus, forgetting that as he goes to the Jordan, he symbolically brings us with him. That is the theological conclusion of the debate of why Jesus was baptized by John. Traditionally it's been taught that his baptism shouldn't have been necessary, not if John's baptism was about repentance, of letting go of past sinful behaviour and seeking to live anew in right relationship with God and others, and yet he accepted it just the same. Why? Because he embraced all of human experience, including the need for repentance, the need to admit that we have gotten off track. If this is the case as we are with him in this acceptance of our experience, then we're present with him too when he experiences being gifted with the Spirit and hears God's affirmation.

And so, God speaks to each of us, saying, Glen, you're my beloved son, Jean, you're my beloved daughter, Bob, you're my beloved child, with you I am well pleased. I invite you to ponder what this means, to really let those words sink in.... Now take the bowl of water you prepared earlier. Touch the water. What does it signify for you? Among many possibilities, I see the primordial waters of the first chapter of Genesis as the Spirit breathed over them like a wind and stirred creation into being. I say that based on our gospel, the Spirit appearing to Jesus to remind us of that, 2 bring us back to the creation story when our first parents were made good and God breathed divine presence into them as I said earlier.

On another level, it is the water of our own beginning in our mother's womb, where God knit us together as Psalm 139 suggests, declaring that we were all wonderfully made. Jesus understood that about himself, about all of us too, and enters the water to bring us back to that. I hear that in God's affirmation of pride in Jesus, saying they're well pleased before Jesus has done anything

in terms of his ministry or purpose. Hear that about yourself. God is well pleased in you without you doing anything, accomplishing anything, as any parent feels about their child, their pride not contingent on success, or ability, but just on their child being themselves. I want you to consider that as you dip your finger in the water, then touch your forehead, feel that claim on you in God's pride, God setting a seal on you as we sang in a hymn a few minutes ago.

We need to hear that, to feel that I think, in the world we live in, because many of us feel that we are not enough just as we are, viewed instead through the lens of our world, considered for what we do or how much we make or how we look, often judged as lesser than another person, perhaps because we're older or younger, weren't born here or were but still asked "where are you from?" Many of us have daily interactions that undermine our sense of self-worth - a racialized person commended for how well they speak, a disabled person spoken slowly to, a woman whose attire is commented on, a gay person told "you don't look gay" like that is meant as a compliment. The intention is not always to hurt but the signal sent is the same. Even our faith can be judged, told as United Church we aren't real Christians because we believe that one of the prime teachings of Jesus is what I've been speaking about, to restore our awareness of our innate goodness in God.

But even though we may be judged for believing that, it doesn't make it less true. God is with us, as close as our breath, loving us, has been from the beginning, gracing us in all we experience in our lives. God is blessing us even in what may seem anything but. That's the context in the Isaiah reading as we're told how Israel was exchanged for Egypt and Ethiopia. That seems to contradict what I've been saying, like God plays favourites. But as medieval rabbi David Kimhi observed, it's a specific, historical statement. You see Cyrus, the king of Persia, allowed the Judeans to go home because a war was brewing between the Persian Empire and its western neighbours of Egypt and Ethiopia. A grateful and so loyal Judah would be a good buffer. That said, the text is not one of cause and effect, God starting a war to bring the people home, so much as observation, the conflict a backdrop to their return. This speaks to me of how our lives unfold, both good and bad happening, sometimes to us, sometimes to others, but within this one truth remains - we are always loved as we are, worthy and blessed, not because of what we do or what is done to us. Now those experiences can draw out who we are, reveal our character in how we treat those around us, may even be a source of growth and learning, but they are neither judgments nor signs of blessing. The blessing is God's presence with us in whatever life throws at us, a gift as sure as the creek that flows near Annie Dillard's home, a constant source of life and grace and renewal.

And so as I close, I invite you to consider the water before you once more, sign of God's blessing for you, and also your families, neighbours, people you know, that you don't know, and beyond people, to all of creation - loved, blessed, claimed by God just as it is, and in that blessing drawn out to what it is to be. May we claim that for ourselves, for others, for all of life, able to hear God say and so to say ourselves: I am, you are, they are, we are all beloved children of God. Amen.