

## A Reminder of Redemption

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Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-22

Our season of Epiphany is framed by three big moments in the gospels, each of which invite us into the mystery, solidarity, and “showing out” of Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-us. These moments invite us to explore our own calls to join Jesus’ ministry in our world. We started last week by looking at the visit of the Magi, remembering that the news of Emmanuel, a new shepherd-king, was and is for more than just one people group, in one place, in one time. This week we celebrate the story of the baptism of Jesus and we will remember the ongoing work of baptism in our own lives. Next week we will attend a wedding at Cana at which Jesus was a guest.

A spiritual and political question that comes up often in Scripture is who is the good news for? In other words, on whose behalf is God working? Who are the insiders and who are the outsiders? Our passage from Isaiah was written and collected long before the time of Jesus, but it gives an answer to this persistent question. The prophet speaks to an audience of Israelites in exile in Babylon, announcing that their return to their homeland is imminent. The message is that after generations of disruption and exile, of wondering where God was and what God was doing, their redemption is coming in the form of return. The passage draws on the Israelite role of the kinsperson-redeemer, a “goel” in Hebrew. The redeemer was responsible for economically redeeming people. If someone was in a dire enough position to need to sell property or to sell even themselves to pay debts, the redeemer’s job was to pay the debt owed so that the vulnerable person would not have to lose property or their own liberty. The prophet gives this role to God on a cosmic scale. Though the Israelites have had good reason to wonder where God was when they were in exile, the prophet offers reassurance that God is their redeemer, and that their return is on its way soon. God knows them by name and has taken on the role of family redeemer.

God will redeem Israel, but does that mean God is only for Israel, to the exclusion of others? Through the centuries, unfortunately, some have answered yes and used parts of this passage to dehumanize people from certain parts of Africa or even the whole continent. Rabbi David Kimhi, a thirteenth century Jewish scholar, however, argued that the references to other nations had to do with other military struggles happening at the same time that the Babylonian leaders released the Israelites to return home. These other nations were rebelling against Babylon and creating enough of a threat to cause the Babylonians to calculate that letting the Israelites return and shifting focus was the lesser threat. Rabbi Kimhi argues that the passage lifts up God as redeemer and God who is present and in fact has always been present, working in and among the political realities that we humans experience. And if God is present and working in our world

as redeemer, we have a call to participate in God's redemptive work as it happens around us. The God of this passage from Isaiah, acting as the one who helps the destitute and lifts the poor out of crushing poverty, invites us to help in that work.

Though this Sunday where the church commemorates Jesus' baptism comes around every year, we should never stop being surprised that Jesus was baptized. Fred Craddock, the well-known preacher and professor at Candler School of Theology at Emory used to emphasize just two words in verse 21: "Jesus also." The whole verse says "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened." What John is offering is a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" as it says earlier in the chapter. The Jesus of the gospels is sinless and therefore has no need of repentance for himself, and yet in a show of solidarity with the people and with us, God incarnate seeks renewal right alongside us. This should offer us confidence in approaching the practice of repentance, as we do every week together, and it should remind us to remain humble. We are human and we will get it wrong some of the time. We will personally fail and we are wrapped up in systemic failures that continue to do harm. That is the truth. The rest of the truth of the good news shown to us in Jesus' baptism is that we are invited to repent and to remember that we are all still called by God, symbolized by our baptisms that we remember and renew this morning. Emmanuel, God-with-us joins us.

The passage ends with this miraculous scene, the presence of the Holy Spirit and God calling Jesus beloved, but we won't move on without backing up to a moment earlier in the passage. John preaches to the crowd: "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. 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." If we're not careful here, we risk falling into a theological trap that goes against the entire purpose of baptism and God-with-us. In this image of Jesus separating wheat from chaff, some are too quick to interpret wheat and chaff to represent different kinds of people: for them the wheat are those who are holy and the chaff are those who are not worthy and destined for damnation. Not only is this a theological misunderstanding but a biological one as well. The chaff is simply the husk of the wheat kernels; every kernel has one for protection but it must be removed for the wheat to be made into flour. This is a metaphor for repentance, and invitation to us all, not an image of some being chosen over others. Baptism is a ritual for reminding us that we are God's beloved and a welcome into a particular church community; it is not a tool for identifying who is worthy and who is not because we are all already worthy. Baptism reminds us of something that is already true: Emmanuel is already with us and will always be with us, and we are beloved by God before we are born and well after we die. When we renew our baptismal promises we remember the truth of God's love for us, and we recognize our need for repentance. The Greek word in the New Testament for repentance is *metanoia*, which means, to change one's mind. Remembering our baptism calls us to embrace the changing of our minds and actions in order to do God's work here on Earth. In baptism there are no insiders and outsiders, because God has already invited all of us and, as we read in Isaiah, God calls us by name and redeems us. Thanks be to God,

Amen.