

ISAIAH 43:1-7 (p. 589)

JANUARY 9, 2022

LUKE 3:15-17, 21-22 (p. 833)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Fill us with your Holy Spirit, Lord, and teach us your ways. Help us to see your Truth, and to hear your Message, as we study together today. And please, make the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, pleasing in your sight. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

"THE CHOSEN"

I remember that day as if it were yesterday! Twenty-some years ago. We were standing on the south side of Crystal Lake, with a ferocious wind blowing out of the north. It was howling to beat the band. Trees were bending almost sideways. Our eyes watered as the thunderous waves crashed onto the shore. There were about a hundred people present that day, dearly loved family and friends. Everyone was holding hands and singing softly, watching as the two of us walked out into the tempest. And after a brief Prayer, and a powerful Confession of Faith, I baptized my son Brady, whom I love, with whom I am well-pleased!

That was my very first Baptism as an Ordained Pastor. It was a powerful moment for me. And I know it was for Brady as well. In fact, every Baptism I have been part of has been a special, spiritual time! There is just something extraordinary that happens when a Believer accepts Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior! And then, in obedience, publicly Proclaims their Faith in Him! Followed by being Baptized into His Name!

In that moment the promised Holy Spirit descends, and the new Believer is sealed with the guarantee of Eternal Life! Listen to what Peter says, talking to the crowds in Acts 2:38. When he was asked how to receive Salvation, he answers, “Repent and be Baptized, every one of you. And you will receive the Holy Spirit”!

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians tells Believers, “You were included in Christ when you heard the Word of Truth, the Gospel of your Salvation. And having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit”. He also writes to the Colossians that those who accept Jesus as both Lord and Savior, are “God’s Chosen People, Holy and Dearly Loved”. To which Peter, in his first letter to the Church, gives a hearty “Amen”! “You are a Chosen People, a Royal Priesthood, a Holy Nation,” he says, “God’s Special Possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light”!

This Christianity thing is serious, isn’t it! At least in the eyes of God. I wonder though, if we tend to forget that? We are a “Chosen People”. And God Himself, the maker of Heaven and Earth, is the one who does “the choosing”. We, in turn, in our Baptism, then “choose the choosing”! It’s symbiotic. We hear God’s Call, and embrace God’s Call! For those of you theologians wrestling with the dialectic between Predestination and Free Will, here is a profound marriage of the two! God decides! Predestination! But then, we also decide! Free Will! So, what I am wondering is, how often do we stop and consider what that actually means?

Did you hear what Isaiah said in our first reading? Speaking on behalf of God, by the way. I, the Lord, “formed you”, “created you”, “redeemed you”, and “summoned you by name”! “I will be with you when you walk through the flames, even when the waters sweep over you!” Almighty God, “the Holy One of Israel”, declares that we are “precious and honored in His sight!” How does that Truth make you feel? Or better yet, how should that Truth make you feel?

Try to get your head around it! We are “A Chosen People”! “A Royal Priesthood”! “A Holy Nation”! “Living Stones”, Peter goes on to say, “being built up into a Spiritual House” (1 Peter 2:5-9)! Moses calls us “a Kingdom of Priests” in Exodus 19:5, as well as “a Holy Nation”! And in Deuteronomy, “A Holy People” whom God “has Chosen to be His own Possession” (Deut. 7:6, 14:2)! John, in Revelation states that Believers are a “Kingdom of Priests” (Rev. 1:6)! And Isaiah, a few chapters after today’s lesson, calls us “Priests of the Lord”, “Ministers of God” (Isaiah 61:6) “A Crown of Beauty in the Hand of the Lord” (Isaiah 62:3). I like that, don’t you! “A Crown of Beauty in the Hand of the Lord”! There is clear a theme, isn’t there!

But what does it mean? Have you ever actually thought about that? What does it mean to be “Holy”, set apart? Chosen! Chosen by God! Chosen for God! Chosen for a specific purpose, a special purpose, in order to “declare His Praises”! Called to be “in the world, but not of it”, right! Called to be different. As Followers of Jesus we’ve been given a mission, a mission to make God known in the world! To spread the Gospel, the very same reason Jesus lived, and died, and rose again! We are “Holy”! “Set Apart”!

And here is the thing. Our Baptism is “that moment” when we claim our mission for ourselves. In our Baptism, we take up our Mantle of Responsibility! You know this, right? You’ve heard it before! Have you ever stopped to seriously contemplate though, the depth of what it means?

Today is the day when the Church officially celebrates the Baptism of our Lord. It’s therefore a great time to consider our own! At the start of His earthly ministry, Jesus, in obedience to the Father, was Baptized by John. All four Gospels witness to it! All four talk about the Holy Spirit descending on Him like a dove. Which means, in order to be one of His Followers, we need to do the same thing. So, think back to that moment when you gave your life to Jesus. Or forward, to that day when you will.

You are a “Chosen People”! Think of a time when you were the chosen for something. Maybe it was an award, or a great job, a special recognition of some kind? Think back to when you were young and they picked you for the school play, or one of the neighborhood sports teams. Imagine being chosen to dance with, or to be married to. Remember what that felt like. Being “chosen” makes you special, doesn’t it?

It's not an inclusive thing, or a common thing. It's a rather special thing. Maybe that makes you feel uncomfortable? I know it sometimes does for me. Our world tries to teach us that “everyone deserves a participation trophy”, that everyone should be treated the same. But is that actually true?

Our texts today aren't inclusive. "I have called you, my people, by name"! "I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead". "I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life"! This "calling", this "choosing" is not inclusive. It's a "gift", one given specifically to you. And as such, it's a "gift" that requires a response.

John the Baptist talks about God's "winnowing fork clearing the threshing floor, gathering the wheat into His barn, and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire". People will be treated differently, based on the choices they make. Not everyone made it through the Flood, did they? It was only Noah and his family, a man who walked righteously with God. During the Exodus, there was great rejoicing on the Israelite side of the parted sea. But as the water thundered back down behind them, there was tremendous grief on the Egyptian side. There are sheep in the book of Revelation, who at the End of Time are gathered into a safe pasture. And there are goats, who are herded out, and into another.

It's called "Remnant Theology", a theme that weaves throughout the Witness of Scripture! "The gate is narrow", we're told, which may sound harsh! But there is a flip side. One that requires a response. You are a "Chosen People", "Holy and Dearly Loved"! And in our Baptism, we are set apart for a Holy purpose!

There is a lot of symbolism associated with Baptism. We should talk about some of it. Baptism is a mark of belonging, a sign if you will, a seal. For some, then, it's like the finish line. You are dunked! Game over! Another sinner has picked up their heavenly crown!

Others though, see it as more of a right-of-passage. Baptism is a hurdle that you need to clear in your race to Christian Adulthood. Instead of it winning the game, Baptism is more like a critical touchdown that allows you into the playoffs. It's like getting your High School diploma so that you can go on to college or trade school, so that you can find a descent job. It's a milestone you pass, on your way to the final destination.

For still others, Baptism is more of a ritual washing. As a bath cleans you from dirt, so your Baptism washes away the filth of your sins. There is an inherent problem in that view though. What happens if you get dirty again? Is one Baptism ever enough? What if my sinful proclivity causes me to stumble again? Does that mean that my first Baptism didn't take? Or that the Preacher who dunked me did something wrong? Or that the Church where it happened wasn't the right one?

Don't raise your hands or anything, but my guess is some of you Baptized Believers have sinned a time or two since you passed through the waters of Baptism. So, does that imply that the vaccine designed to protect you from sin, didn't take?

There was a young boy fishing from a bridge when a traveling Preacher walked by and saw his large pile of fish. The Pastor asked the young man what kind of fish they were. To which the boy answered, "I don't know their real name. But I know that they are Christian fish". "Why is that?" asked the curious Pastor. "Well," said the young man, "shortly after you get them out of the water, they all start to go bad"! You see the problem, right? Did your Baptism "take"?

Still others zero-in on the “gifts” of Baptism, the seal, the promised Holy Spirit, the guarantee of Acts 3:8. So, what would you say Baptism mean to you? Or more importantly, more critical really, what does it mean to God?

In Scripture we find Baptism with water, as well as a Baptism of the Holy Spirit. We hear about Baptism for the remission of sins, and Baptism into Jesus’ Name. We see believers in Acts 8 that were Baptized into Jesus’ Name, but who had not yet received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. But then, just two chapters later, we see believers who had been Baptized with the Holy Spirit, but who had not yet been Baptized into Jesus’ Name! Which one is right? Does it matter? Is the “when”, or the “order” important? Both are biblical, so I’d say no! What matters is, that we receive “both”, that we choose both. that we are open to both!

So, what is Baptism? Is it simply an initiation rite, like living through pledge week in a sorority or a fraternity, and then going through the paddling line? Is it a mark of inclusion, like “gang colors” or a tattoo? Or is it a mark of separation instead, only in a good way? Does your Baptism actually set you apart, make you Holy, designate your role in the world as different from that of others? Is Baptism something that once you have experienced it, you never have to even think about again? Or is it something more?

The English word “Baptize” comes from a Greek word that means “to dunk”, or “to immerse.” John the Baptist was actually “John the Dunker”. The biblical form of Baptism includes passing a candidate completely underwater, immersing them!

This is obviously where one of the most powerful symbolic images originates—the idea of dying to your old self, and being resurrected to new life in Jesus Christ. Which reminds me! Did you know that there is a difference in Denominational Coffee Pots? It's true! Some say right on them, "Do Not Immerse"!

What I'm trying to say is, there are different "forms" of Baptism too. And different stages of life when it happens. But the Truth of Baptism is far bigger than all that! Those who are Baptized as infants, later choose, or confirm their Baptism for themselves. While those who practice "Believers Baptism" are "dedicated" by their parents when they are young. The point is, we are Chosen by the Lord! And then at some point, we Choose the Lord!

Almighty God Himself reaches out to us and invites us into a personal relationship with Him! And Almighty God Himself, working in our hearts, enables us to respond to that gracious invitation! Just as Adam and Eve willfully turned away from God in the Garden of Eden, in our Baptism, we willfully turn towards Him! Why wouldn't any parent, heavenly or earthly, be well-pleased!

Jesus was Baptized to "fulfill all righteousness" we are told in Scripture. Acts tells us of three thousand people all being Baptized on the very same day (Acts 2:41), of Philip Baptizing an Ethiopian Eunuch along a dusty road, and of Gentile converts all across Asia Minor being Baptized into Jesus' Name. We are told to in Acts 3 to "Repent and be Baptized, every one of you".

And in Matthew 28 to “go and make Disciples of all nations, Baptizing them into the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit”! There is a lot of different methods and times witnessed to in Scripture! But one thing is certain, this dunking thing is obviously important!

And a big piece of that, is because your Baptism marks the start of your ministry to the world. It is a commissioning, if you will, an ordination, a setting apart for service. Baptism is an intentional “turning away” from earthly values, and norms, and desires—and a “turning towards” Christian ideals and values! In Baptism you are grafted onto the Body of Christ, included in the Church Universal! You are “named” and “claimed”, by Jesus Himself! But you are also called to be accountable! Don’t miss that part! You are now part of the Family, “His Family”, “His Church”! You are an “Apostle”, one sent to others! It is not that you are made perfect at that moment, but rather that you acknowledge, in that moment, that you are truly in need of God’s Forgiveness and Grace!

The symbolism and meanings are wide and varied! But one thing is crystal clear! Through Baptism, you now belong to God! You are a Royal Priesthood, a Holy Nation, a people set apart, chosen by God, beloved sons and daughters, co-heirs with Jesus Christ! That can be daunting, I know! Overwhelming even, at times! But it is Joyful beyond belief!

One last thing that I would like to point out. It was while Jesus was Praying, after His Baptism, that the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove. Can you think of a better way to reexamine your life? Maybe one key to Baptism involves taking your personal “winnowing fork” and deciding what needs to stay, and what needs to go? You know, throw every aspect of your life up into the air and consider what is worth keeping, versus what is simply “chaff”. What do you think?

A portion of my undergraduate studies was in Comparative Religions. And there was one African tribe, the Ebo, who fascinated me. When a woman of that tribe discovered that she was pregnant, she would go into the wilderness with a few close friends. Together, they would pray and meditate until they heard “the song” of that child. They believe that every soul has its own specific vibration that expresses its own unique flavor and purpose in life.

When the women were atune to the song, they’d start to sing it out loud. Afterwards, they would return to the village and teach it to everyone else. Then, when the child was born, the entire tribe gathered around the child, and sang the child’s song to him or her. At every other milestone in life—at the dawn of adulthood, when they are married—that song is sung to them. And finally, when the soul of that person is about to pass from this world, family and friends gather at the bedside, just as they did at their birth, and sing the person into the next life! It’s powerful!

There is one other occasion when the villagers gather and sing to the child. If at any time during his or her life the person commits a crime, or an aberrant social act, they are called to the center of the village, and the people of the community form a circle around them and sing, in order to help that person remember who they are meant to be!

“You are a Chosen People, a Royal Priesthood”! “I have redeemed you”! “I have Called you by name.” “You are mine.” Maybe we need to sing that tune a little more often? To both ourselves, and to each other! What do you think? And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Lord, thank you for Calling us. Thank you for Naming us your Beloved. Thank you for Claiming us as your own. You have Summoned each one of us by name, and Redeemed us from bondage. We know that when we pass through the waters, and the fires, that you will be with us. You are the Lord, our God, the Holy One of Israel.

Father, some of us are feeling a bit overwhelmed right now. The flames are licking at our feet. The waves are crashing all around. We need you to take our hand and lead us through. Walk beside us Lord, as our Friend. Walk before us, as our Guide. And walk behind us, as our Protector, our Encourager, and our Support.

Lord, we stumble on our journey, more often than not. Help us to rise again each time that we do. Forgive us when we sin. Empower us when we fail to act. And fill us with your Spirit when we are feeling empty and alone. Shape us into the people that you would have us become, as individuals, and as a Church, as the Body of Christ here on earth.

Lord, we need your healing touch. We need it for ourselves, and for our nation. We need it throughout our divided and war-torn world. We need it on our hearts and on our minds. We need it for our poor and lonely. We need it for those who are so distracted by the lure of this world that they have lost sight of you. We also need it for

Father, sweep through our world in extraordinary ways. Come to us right where we are, and then, move us to where we need to be. And Bless us Lord, your people, as we pray together now the prayer that your own Son taught to us saying, Our Father...