

## 1 Epiphany Year C Jan 12 2025 - Baptism of the Lord

It fits

Isaiah 43:1-7

Welcome to the new year. Today we get to talk about a subject that is important to me and my walk with Jesus. Baptism.

I have always considered my relationship with Jesus as a given. I grew up attending the Episcopal Church until high school. It wasn't always easy for my parents to gather up my brothers to make it to church on time. It seemed like the three of us had an unspoken rule that at least one of us would take the brunt of our parents' frustration as we would work as a unit to stay at home on Sunday. We would do such things as forget to put on our shoes before we got in the car, or we would move slowly out of the shower while we got dressed. I think you get the idea. It never worked, but we tried anyways.

When my brothers and I started to attend High School, my parents dropped the expectation of having us attend church. My brothers and I were free to decide for ourselves if we wanted to continue or not. Like most kids at that age, we welcomed the change and stopped attending church. However, my identity in Jesus never wavered, it just wasn't that important. My brothers and I continued to attend Christmas Eve and Easter Sundays as a family, but that was the level of my attendance.

It was when I was living in Canyon Texas that I started to take my faith more seriously. While I was attending a non-denominational church, the college students one day pointed out that I seemed to have the gifts of the priesthood. I laughed at the suggestion and thought to myself that I could not see myself as "Fr. Doug", however the seed was planted.

I was drawn to my Grand-Dad's leadership style which was to find out what people did well or at least have a desire to improve and give them the tools and support to make sure they were successful. This was an effective way to affirm people. If the people are doing well so will the group and organization. This is how I ran a restaurant and became a rising star among my manager peers.

So, it makes sense that in 1990 during the annual Bishop's visit in Wyoming that my life took a major turn. The Bishop of Wyoming talked about the importance of our personal Baptism. He articulated that by our baptism, everyone has an important role in the

church. With this new understanding of our Baptism, a church, no matter its size or make up of people, they have a role in God's kingdom. That vision spoke to my soul. I was a good team player but never the team captain. However, with this idea of shared leadership based on our Baptism, I knew I could be effective.

I came home in my faith in Jesus and have found my identity in God through my baptism to be a source of hope. Even during the darker times in my life, I relied upon Jesus' promises made to me at my baptism to see me through.

In other churches the baptismal font is moveable and often placed outside of the common space. I believe the placement of baptismal fonts happens more out of convenience and the need to use the building space effectively. I hold the opinion that it was the unintentional placement of the Baptismal Font that took away the importance and centrality of baptism of our theology in the church. It wasn't that long ago when baptisms were considered a private event and not held on Sunday's. It was during the 1979 Book of Common Prayer revision that the importance of Baptism was brought back into central focus. From the beginning of my priesthood, I was informed by this Baptismal theology.

One of the gifts of St. Mark's is the placement of the Baptismal Font. A person cannot enter this worship space and not notice it. I have watched people when they walk in to dip their finger in the water and make a sign of the cross in front of their body. It is fun to see children on their toes looking over the top of the walls to see the water inside. What I also appreciated is that the font is familiar and accessible to everyone. It fits.

I believe people want to fit in and be accepted by others. They want to be part of something that is bigger than themselves. When people find their spiritual and emotional home, they often are generous and kind toward others. When people are not afraid of life, they become confident in who they are as a person. They too fit in.

Because we are at the final stages of this year's College Football Playoffs, I am reminded of the lessons that I have learned from well-known college football coaches. I admire the coach's ability to motivate young players to do their best. Every so often a coach will point out, with personal pride, how they witnessed their young players who changed their lives outside of football. I believe it is an unspoken hope for most coaches that the lives of their players continue to change and be fruitful long after the final game has been played. Most coaches find themselves having to work with some

athletes who came from broken homes and dysfunctional settings. So, for these broken players they find the football field is where they are most at home and they draw strength from the team. The coaches themselves are always under pressure to perform. They need to keep creating a team dynamic that makes sure that everyone fits. The need for both coaches and team players excel never ceases. If the coach doesn't have a winning program, they along with the players, face the reality that they could be replaced. This pressure can manifest itself as a form of fear.

The people of Israel found themselves displaced when the book of Isaiah was written. Isaiah's intended audience was fearful. They had been displaced from their spiritual home; the program had failed to perform. The people were the subject to other kings and cultures that eroded their belief in God. The story of the Passover in which a powerful king was defeated, and the Hebrews were liberated still held a place in the people's collective identity. However, the power of the memory of the Passover seemed to be growing dim. People lost confidence in God could deliver them from their plight. The people of Isaiah's time didn't fit into their surroundings. The entire book of Isaiah sought to inspire the reader or listener not to fear.

Today's assigned reading from Isaiah was a reminder to the people that God had acted in the past and was going to act again in their future. God once again was reaching out to a broken people and spoke about how precious they are in His eyes. Almighty God was going to redeem them for His sake and purpose. God did not form the nation for them to fail, but to thrive with His blessing and leadership. The people of Israel didn't do anything to earn God's attention and love, but like a loving parent or caring coach, God was not going to leave the people in their place of fear.

God was bringing the people home. It was God who was going to make sure that they fit in and are respected by others in the world.

Now a word from Dr. Kathleen O'Connor who is the professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary about today's Isaiah passage:

(quote) To be redeemed according to Isaiah's law means to be bought out of human bondage by one's kin, a close member of the extended family. This means two things. When God redeems Israel, God does not redeem the nation from its sin but from slavery to Babylon, from the sinful conditions of another nation's aggrandizement; and when God redeems Israel, God asserts close kinship, family relationship, with them. Through deadly perils, through waters that overwhelm, and through flames that consume, God promises to be with them. They will survive these devastations because "I have called you by name;" because "I will be with you."

(Dr. O'Connor referenced the Isaiah reading verses 3 through 5 as she says). God's self-declarations, the repetitive "I" statements across the poem, revealed by function and action who this Redeemer is.

"I am the LORD your God ...

I give you Egypt as your ransom ...

I love you,

I give people in return for you ...

I am with you."

These first-person announcements have immense power, not simply because they reveal divine strength or because they convey God's emotional, familial connection to the people. These statements have startling authority because they also establish the nation's relationship with God through a legal exchange of cosmic dimensions. God buys them back from slavery, but the currency of exchange is neither money nor property; it is with other nations that God pays their ransom. Verse 4 from the Isaiah reading says - "I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life." The national enslavement to Babylon will be the subject of a giant, global transaction because **the Redeemer** is the governor of the world.

After this exchange, their Redeemer promises, with still more "I" affirmations, to bring them back to the land, to their true identity, and to their God. (Listen to what was said this morning from Isaiah)

- "I will bring your offspring" from every corner of the earth, from the east, the west, the north, the south, "everyone who is called by my name."

This ingathering of the nation draws them back to their land and to the relationship for which they were created in the first place - to life and with God who loves them, honors them, and holds them **"precious."** (Dr. O'Conner points out in the 7th verse of this passage) It is they whom - I created for my glory."

For these reasons, for the sake of this vision about to be realized just over the horizon, God commands them, **"Do not fear."** (end of quote)

Some of us may feel that we are fearful. Some of us may feel that there are no reasons to believe in a better future. Some of us may even feel that God has removed Himself from our lives and we are on our own to solve the problems we face. Some of us may feel that we don't fit in. However, we are marked as Christ's own forever. We don't have to be fearful. We know that we are loved.

Here at St. Mark's everyone fits in. We seek to make sure that everyone counts and that behaviors that separate us will be diminished. The Lord's Table is open to all who seek God. We didn't choose our brothers and sisters in Christ; however, we accept everyone because Jesus accepted us. Yes, our differences will remain, however how we treat one another will be based on respect and love.

As we all move into the new year, it is good to be reminded that we are God's people and Jesus love us. We are the people who are the recipient of God's love and joy. We are the delight in the Holy Spirit's eyes, we don't have to be fearful of the future. The water of chaos, and in our situation here in Corpus the lack of it, will not overwhelm us. The fires of fear may be burning all around us, and for those who live in LA this is really the situation, God's love will make sure that life will find a way to rise out of the ashes. Nothing can destroy God's faith and love in us. God calls us by our names, and it is also God who will never forget us nor forsake us

Nick Saban, an American sportscaster and former professional and college football coach, would tell his players during their practice sessions, "You don't get to choose how you feel, but you do get to choose how you act."

We may feel fearful. We may feel overwhelmed by the circumstances of life. We may feel that we have failed God and one another. But we can choose to act on God's faith in the people of Israel and redeemed a lost people. So, to all of us here today, act according to the promises that are made in your Baptismal Covenant. Be bold and generous with one another in love and respect.

This is our time to bring God's unceasing love for the world alive through our actions of faith and our belief in Jesus Christ, our redeemer.

I have faith that those who connect with St. Mark's will experience the unconditional love of Jesus and to find a spiritual home where they fit in.