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 Baptism of Jesus Sunday

Through the Waters
Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,^[d] ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "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^[e] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ 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."

The Baptism of Jesus

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved;^[a] with you I am well pleased."^[h]

It's a **scary** world.

It's so easy to get overwhelmed by **fear** these days, isn't it?
 Just turn on the news, or pop open your computer and voila!
 Fear!

All the violence everywhere, all the strife and division, and hatred,
 All the disasters, it makes the world seem like a very scary place, doesn't it?

And yet, we hear these three powerful words: **do not fear**
 We hear them from God---over and over and over again,
 I wonder, what would it take for us to **believe** it?
 And what would it take for us to believe that we too
 Are beloved children of God—
 And that we need NOT fear the world around us?

The people who heard the words in **Isaiah 43**
 were people filled with fear.
 These Israelites had seen their homeland of Jerusalem

completely destroyed by Babylon.
 They had been taken as prisoners of war,
 They were living as exiles in a foreign country.
 And then they saw another super power—Persia—
 threatening to destroy Babylon!

Talk about things only getting worse,
 these people were worried that they would **never return home** again.
 And just as they are overwhelmed with fear, the prophet Isaiah brings some
 incredible words in the 40th chapter of Isaiah
 (you may know them from Handel's Messiah)
Comfort, comfort the people...do not be afraid.
 And here in Isaiah 43 we hear the message...**do not fear for I am with you.**
As you walk through the waters and fires of life, I will be with you...

Near the end of John Bunyan's classic allegorical novel, *The Pilgrim's Progress*,
 the chief character, **Christian**, comes near the end of his journey, and has to
 cross a scary river. He is terribly afraid.
 Together with his friend, Hopeful, they wade into the waters, and Christian
 cries out, "I sink into deep Waters, the Billows go over my head, all the Waves
 go over me." And Hopeful replies with grace-filled words: "Be of good cheer,
 my Brother. I feel the bottom, and it is good..." (*John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's
 Progress (1678), pg.1 sec. X*).

Imagine hearing in the height of your **own fear and anxiety**, God saying to
 you: *Do not fear, for I am with you.*

I have shared those words with so many people,
 With so many of you,
 With myself.
 I have prayed them over and over again.
 As a **reminder that God is right beside us** as we walk through the waters and
 fires of life.

How do we come to **believe** this when we are afraid?
 And take this to heart?

The words "**do not fear**" are so frequently found in the Bible,
 some say it's an **essential element** of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

a part of the foundation for everything else.

How can we have the *love* of Christ if we are filled with fear?

How can we hear *good news* if we are consumed by fear?

Did you know *these are the first three words* we hear at all the entry points in Jesus birth, and resurrection?

Do not fear—these were the words of introduction from the *angel to Mary*.

These were the words the angels told the *shepherds* when announcing Jesus' birth.

These are *the first words* spoken after Jesus is raised from death, and the first words he speaks *to his disciples* as the risen Lord.

They are *powerful* words, words we all need to hear, especially now.

Especially today.

Especially if we are going through our own waters and fires of life.

Which is pretty much all of us—and if not right now, then one day.

I love a story that one of my preaching professors Tom Long tells about a friend who pastors in an inner city church, in a very dangerous part of the city.

This pastor was amazed by *a woman in his church*, who had no fear about coming to meetings and services at the church at night,

even though she had no car and would have to walk home alone in the dark.

One night he discovered her secret.

When he was locking up the church, he saw it.

He saw her walking down the street toward her apartment.

But as she walked, she was holding her hand out, as if someone was walking beside her and holding her hand. As she walked, she was humming a familiar hymn, "*Precious Lord, take my hand.....precious Lord, lead me home.*"

From a sermon by Rev. Thomas Long, Called by Name, January 11, 2004, www.day1.org

She had heard God's words

Do not fear, for I am with you—

and she *took those words to heart*.

She literally imagined God walking beside her,

Jesus holding her hand, all the way home.

Now what if we could live that way—every single day?

You know, this is different than the way we are expected to live, right?

We are expected by the world to discover our *own strength*, right?

That's the worldly way of viewing hard times and distress, isn't it?
 Pull yourself together. Find your inner strength.
 That's what other people would have us do.
 Haven't you heard that before—get it together, don't cry, you can do it!
 But as Christians, we have someone to turn to---
 the **only one** who gives true strength and peace!
 A Precious Lord, to take our hand!

Today we are promised by God: *do not fear*.
 But we also hear something **even more**.
 We hear words of **assurance and comfort**,
 We hear words of **affirmation and love**.

To the Israelites God said,
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.
I have called you by name, you are mine.

I have called you by name, you are mine.
 What do those words **mean to you?**

God knows you, God knows your name, of course.
 But --You are God's.
 You are a Beloved child of God.

Friends, do you realize **God says that about each one of us?**
I know this one,
I called you by name, you are mine.

I wonder what would happen if we heard our **own name** in Isaiah 43...
 Do not fear (your name)
 I am with you (your name)...., I have called you by name, you are mine.
 What does that **sound like to you?**

You know, something **similar happened to Jesus** at his baptism.
 He heard God call His name.
 He was affirmed in his identity, and his ministry.
 He was affirmed as one of the Trinity when the Holy Spirit descended upon
 him like a dove, and God said:
"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Wow.

These are words of **assurance and pride**.

This was his **preparation** for a time of temptation in the desert, and then his three year ministry before going to the cross.

It was him **being built up inside**—to **sustain him** through hard times!

Just think of how powerful it is to have someone **affirm you**.

When was the last time someone said something affirming to you?

Or you, to someone else?

(Sometimes affirmation is contagious!)

Do you ever think of God as your **loving parent**, saying to you,

you are my child, I love you, I'm so pleased with you?

Have you ever imagined God saying these words to **you**?

Author and theologian Henri Nouwen once said,

"Over the years, I have come to realize that the **greatest trap** in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but **self-rejection**. ...

When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection.

As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, "Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody." ... [My dark side says,] I am no good... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned.

Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "**Beloved**."

Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.

<https://www.goodreads.com/.../9477-life-of-the-beloved-spirit>.

Do you realize that's who you are? The Beloved?

Stop for a moment and close your eyes

I want you to **imagine God calling you Beloved**.

Imagine Jesus beside you in this time and place, and as you look to him, he looks right at you, saying.

Do not be afraid. I am with you. I have called you by name, you are mine.

You are my child, the Beloved, and I am so pleased with you!

Isaiah 43 and the baptism of Jesus are **perfectly paired** because
 In his baptism, Jesus passes through the waters of life,
 and comes to his **full identity** as the Son of God and Savior of the world.
 He is the one **bringing new life** for all of God's people.

And it is **the same God---**
 who declared through the prophet **Isaiah**
*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers,
 they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be
 burned, and the flame shall not consume you. Do not fear, for I am with you.*

It is the same God in the Gospel of **Luke**, chapter 3:
*Now when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was
 opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a
 voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well
 pleased."*

This is why we hear **both** passages today, and **remember our baptism**.

In **our baptism**, we pass through the waters,
 Just like the Israelites did in the exodus,
 Just like Jesus did in his baptism.

And our passing through the water **does not prevent us from suffering**,
 Instead it assures us of **who** we are, and **whose** we are, despite our suffering.

God says to us in our baptism,
You are my Beloved Child—just like God said to Jesus.

God says to us in our baptism,
you are mine, I have called you by name,
Do not fear, for I am with you—just like God said to the Israelites.

Today after the sermon we will **reaffirm our own baptism**
 with a special ceremony, and if you wish you can come forward after the
 liturgy and receive water in the sign of the cross on your forehead and take a
 small piece of round glass from the basket, to help you remember your
 baptism this year. I took a sharpie and wrote my name on mine to place in my
 home, so you can do that as well.

Friends, hear the ***Good News*** of the Gospel today:
Do not fear, for God is with us.
God has called us by name, we are Beloved children.
May we hear it, and believe it.
And to that, all God's people said, Amen.