

Isaiah 43:1-7 ~ Luke 3:15-22

We are Built on a Foundation Not Our Own

Baptism of the Lord ~ Congregational Reaffirmation of Baptism

January 9, 2022

Introduction:

"I love you." That's what God says in Isaiah 43:4. Henry read it just moments ago. "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." Did you know, this is the *only* place in our entire Bible where God says these three words? Second Isaiah wrote this text to the Israelites exiled in Babylon around 540 BCE. They were a people who *were* walking through fire, nearly drowning in despair at the time. And right there, in the midst of the fire storm comes the voice of God saying, "I love you. Fear not. I am with you." And God says these words to all of them. Not just to one individual.

Being told we are loved, and *knowing* we are loved are two very different things. Being told we are loved, and living like we are grounded in our identity as precious and honored, makes all the difference in how we live and move and have our being. Especially when we are walking through fire that makes it hard to see or breathe. Kind of like all of us, still slogging through this COVID pandemic that refuses to be over, as much as we want it to be. Or like us trying to discern God's voice, in the shouting match of dueling ideologies and interpretations of the assault on our capitol a year ago.

Our Second Scripture Lesson from the Gospel of Luke, takes us once again to the banks of the river Jordan on what you might call Jesus' inauguration day of his ministry on earth. Jesus will take center stage, but not before John the Baptist's powerful set as the warm-up band. And not until John had already gotten himself in political hot water with Herod, who would arrest and ultimately do away with him. In today's story just before John is whisked away, Jesus chooses to begin his public ministry as a man standing in the crowd, not the first, maybe even the last in line to be baptized. Jesus getting wet, dripping with the water that is the outward and visible, touchable, tangible sign of the invisible grace of the Spirit. Jesus praying. Jesus hearing that voice that we all need to hear.

Sermon:

I am self-made. Didn't anyone tell you? I brought myself into the world when I decided to be born on a bright Monday morning. Then I figured out how cells replicate to grow my own arms and legs and head to a reasonable height and size. Then I filled my own mind from kindergarten to graduation with information I gleaned from the great works of literature... I am quoting Kate Bowler, Canadian professor and author. She continues: I'm joking, but sometimes it feels like the pressure we are under. An entire self-help and wellness industry made sure we got the memo: we are supposed to articulate our lives as a solitary story of realization and progress. Work. Learn. Fix. Change. Every exciting action sounds like it is designed for an individual who needs to learn how to conquer a world of their own making.

It's harder to remember a deeper, comforting truth: we are built on a foundation not our own. We were born because two other people created a combination of biological matter. We went to

schools where dozens and dozens of people crafted ideas and activities to construct categories in our minds. We learned skills honed by generations of craftspeople. We pray and worship with spiritual ideas refined by centuries of tradition. Almost nothing about us is original. Thank God...ⁱ

Yes, the truth is, each of us and all of us are a group project. The whole story of our Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, tells this truth. And so, of course, Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, second cousin of John, had a group baptism. You heard how Luke tells the story, “when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized.” No VIP, special entrance or pass. “And was praying.” Did you catch that? (Luke 3:21) Only Luke’s gospel includes this detail that Jesus was praying. This will be a golden thread running through the Gospel of Luke: the centrality of prayer throughout Jesus’ life on earth. From today at his baptism to his final day and hour, hanging on the cross.

We are told that when Jesus prayed, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended. Jesus knew from whom he was made. The rock from which he was hewn. And on that rock, he stood and withstood, whatever each day and hour threw at him. What about us? Do you want to feel and hear the Holy Spirit’s presence? Pray to the one who formed you, created you, calls you by name. Claims you. Does your heart burn for justice for the least, the last, the lost? Pray. Prayer is where justice begins. I love the way Luke doesn’t tell us *what* Jesus prayed. Instead, we are told what Jesus heard God saying back to him: “You, are my Beloved Son, with You I am well pleased.” What do we hear God saying to us, today? Whatever stuff you’ve been through or has been done to you, God is saying to us, “I see you with love.” Jesus calls us to see others with love. Whether we feel like it or not. Friends, we were baptized into this way of seeing others. The waters of baptism call us to try our best to see others as God sees them. Prayer can give us new eyes.

I ran across a prayer practice this week from Richard Rohr’s daily meditation podcast that can help us put this into our everyday lives. It can help us to look at another person beneath their role, underneath the expectations we may place upon them. The person underneath the mask they may or may not be wearing. You can use this with a person who is a stranger, while you are waiting in line at the grocery, for the grocery clerk or with someone you know very well. Here it is, a takeaway from today’s sermon: the prayer practice is called: *Gazing with Love on Anotherⁱⁱ* and involves two phrases, and two breaths. You can do this silently with your eyes and with your breath.

*As you breathe in: **I see you with love/as you breathe out: gifted, cherished.***
*Second breath in: **Grateful/second breath out: for who you are.***

Did you hear John say, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Luke 3:16b) Make no mistake: this foundational, revelational love is fierce and fiery. It fuels the Divine Love that does not stand idly by as evil goes about its cruel and destructive business. John paints a picture of Jesus with a winnowing fork. How can that be good news? A winnowing fork is a tool similar to a pitchfork that would be used to lift harvested wheat up into the air into the wind. The wind would then blow away the lighter chaff, allowing the edible grains to fall to the

threshing floor. The chaff stands for something worthless. There's a crucial truth here about good and evil that this metaphor can help us to see.

Wheat and chaff are part of the same stalk. Let this metaphor help us to get over the toxic notion that the "wheat" stands for good people. And that "chaff" stands for bad people. And by God, we know which is which. That is *not* the Good News. John the Baptist knew, Jesus taught us: there is good and bad in each of us. Our call as baptized beloved children of God, is to welcome the winnowing fork, as Jesus helps us to turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world. Evil like the forces that are dividing us politically, I would call that chaff. Evil like the toxic spread of disinformation, that is also chaff that must be addressed.

Wheat is the unfailing love that crosses borders and boundaries. A love, that helps us make a new kind of space between us for discovery and curiosity and learning. A space I believe we are all hungering for. Where do you see wheat? I see wheat in the *Juntos* program that will start here on Thursday night. A program that the Holy Spirit blew our way, to provide Latino students and their parents with skills and resources to help them succeed in high school and higher education. I see grains of wheat gathering as an increasingly wide circle of faith communities in Marshfield are stepping up to help sponsor Afghan refugee families resettle here in Marshfield, in the coming months. I also see wheat in the seven-person team of FPC men ranging in age from 20 – 80 who with the help of a rented lift, literally brought new light into our sanctuary, changing multiple lightbulbs that had burned out. Yes, it takes a committee to change a Presbyterian lightbulb—especially when it's on the ceiling of our sanctuary.

True confession from your pastor. On Monday, I got to wondering whether or not the Packers had won their game with the Minnesota Vikings. I knew they were heavily favored. But you never know... Yes, it was already more than 12 hours after their game and I didn't yet know. So, I pulled out my phone to google "Did the Green Bay Packers win?" I typed in just one word, "Did" and immediately the first google auto question was, "Did the Packers win?" I guess I wasn't the first person to ask. Or the Google god can read my mind, and was talking to me.

How do you suppose God would complete a question that began with the word "did"? Did you love others, that person who annoyed or disappointed you, the way I love you? Did you resist the chaff choice, burn the chaff that is chafing us, and make the harder wheat choice today? Did you let Jesus do the sifting and threshing for you, so that the wheat is fueling your spirit fire? Did you help me spread love and laughter and joy and compassion?

On December 26, exactly two weeks ago, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, passed on from this life to the next, at the age of 90: the South African Anglican Bishop and theologian who worked with Nelson Mandela to end the sin of apartheid through non-violent protest. The "Arch" as he was affectionately known, chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate the human rights abuses committed by pro and anti-apartheid groups. Tutu also campaigned heartily for LGBTQ rights, dissenting from the official policies of most of the world's Anglican churches.

Desmond Mpilo Tutu, was born into humble circumstances in Klerksdorp, South Africa. He let the wheat of God's love fuel and form his entire 90 years. Speaking personally, his writings and witness have grown my spirit beyond the telling. In 2016, I had the absolute blessing of sharing the sacrament in Cape Town early one weekday morning with "the Arch" presiding. There were less than 30 of us assembled for this quiet, early morning service, after which we walked a couple of blocks to share breakfast with him. A morning I will never forget.

When a student once asked the Arch if he could have one wish granted to reverse an injustice what would it be, he said he'd have to ask for two. One for world leaders to forgive the debts of developing nations that hold them in such thrall. The other, "is for the world to end the persecution of people because of their sexual orientation, which is every bit as unjust as that crime against humanity, apartheid. This is a matter of ordinary justice... It is also a matter of love. Every human being is precious. We are all—all of us—part of God's family. We all must be allowed to love each other with honor. Yet all over the world, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are persecuted. We treat them as pariahs and push them outside our communities. We make them doubt that they too are children of God. This must be nearly the ultimate blasphemy. We blame them for what they are."ⁱⁱⁱ

At the end of the *Book of Joy*, which is essentially the recording of a conversation between y Tutu, and the Dalai Lama, by Douglas Abrams. He asked "The Arch" to address the readers and offer them a blessing. In the blessing he gave, I hear echoes of Isaiah 43. I hear God's "three little words" that can move mountains of mistakes, mistrust, misinformation. Three little words that can clear the threshing floor of division and derision, and open the flood gates of grace upon grace. As a way to honor this great servant of God, and mentor to me as well as countless others around the globe (and in this room); and as we prepare to reaffirm our baptismal identity, I gratefully end my sermon with his blessing:

Dear Child of God, you are loved with a love that nothing can shake, a love that loved you long before you were created, a love that will be there long after everything has disappeared. You are precious, with a preciousness that is totally quite immeasurable. And God wants you to be like God. Filled with life and goodness and laughter—and joy. God, who is forever pouring out God's whole being from all eternity, wants you to flourish. God wants you to be filled with joy and excitement and ever longing to be able to find what is so beautiful in God's creation: the compassion of so many, the caring, the sharing. And God says, Please my child, help me. Help me to spread love and laughter and joy and compassion. And you know what, my child? As you do this—hey, presto—you discover joy. Joy, which you had not sought, comes as the gift, as almost the reward for this non-self-regarding caring for others.^{iv}

ⁱ Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie, *Good Enough: 40ish Devotionals for a Life of Imperfection*, (Convergent Books: New York, NY, 2022), pp. 51-53. To be published in February 2022. Used with permission by CAC, Richard Rohr, Daily Meditation, January 6, 2022.

ⁱⁱ Richard Rohr, Center for Action and Contemplation podcast, *Week One 2022 practice*, 1.8.22

ⁱⁱⁱ Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *God Is Not A Christian: And Other Provocations*, (HarperCollins: New York, NY, 2011), pp. 54-55.

^{iv} His Holiness the Dalai Lama & Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, (Avery, imprint of Penguin Random House: New York, NY, 2016), p. 298.