

Well Pleased

January 9, 2022

Matthew 2: 1-12 (at the start of worship)

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Isaiah 43: 1-3

¹ But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² 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. ³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Luke 3: 15-17 and 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, 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 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.” 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; with you I am well pleased.”



Welcome to the start of our next worship series, “Love Never Ends: Being the Body of Christ.” This series will bridge from Advent, where we were invited to come home to Christ for Christmas, to Lent, where we will seek to be honest with ourselves. This is, admittedly, a difficult exercise. Walking through Lent, looking deep within, takes diligence and discipline. It also takes a whole lot of grace to see ourselves as we truly are.

But that is the only hope we have if we are to be gathered up in Jesus one day. This new series will help us to prepare for our Lenten journey as we explore the call to be Christ in the world. This call is both challenging and rewarding. As we begin today, remembering baptism as the means to entering God's grace, let us begin with a word of prayer...



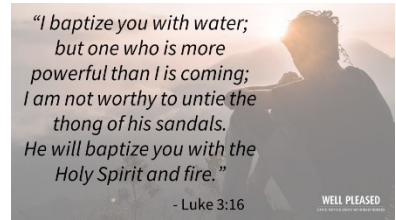
Today in worship we center on baptism – Jesus' and ours. There is a connection between birth and baptism and love – the love of the one who created us, formed us, called us, and

made us his own. Baptism and birth go hand in hand too – flesh and blood and water and spirit. Being born into the world and being born into the kingdom of God both involve transformation. Baptism is not only a sign of our identity in God but is also the beginning of God's shaping process in our lives. In baptism God chooses us and then proceeds to do it over and over and over again. Through baptism, God calls us beloved and invites us to live into that love, empowering us to share that love in our daily lives.

We began worship today with the wise men. They saw the star – the light – and journeyed from afar to worship the newborn king. The wise men or magi had received an epiphany. Their epiphany was the revelation that this babe was the savior of the world. Today we first turn to Luke 3, where another epiphany is realized. Turn with me to our gospel lesson for today as we revisit Jesus' baptism.

As our passage begins in verse 15, we see that the buzz created by John the Baptist – the call to repent, to prepare the way for the Lord, to be baptized as a sign of that repentance – the buzz has people questioning: could John be the one?

In the next verse, John sets them straight. He plainly tells the people, *“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*



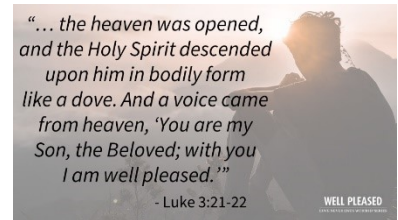
fire.” There is a clear difference – at least in John’s mind – between himself and Jesus. John knew that he was doing vital work, important work. John knew that he was fulfilling the role that God had selected for him to do, the role foretold by the angel Gabriel when he visited Zechariah, John’s father in the temple. Growing up the only son of a priest, John would have been well aware of the many prophecies that his ministry and life were fulfilling. All this would have maybe gotten to some of our heads. Not so with John the Baptist. He was still fulfilling his role, pointing to the one whom he came to prepare the way for.

Suddenly Jesus is baptized in verse 21. In Luke’s version, we almost miss the fact that John baptized Jesus. If you desire more detail on Jesus’ baptism, take some time this week with GPS question three. It draws you to Matthew 3 and John 1, two other accounts of Jesus’ baptism. In today’s passage it is as if Jesus was standing in line with a bunch of others waiting to be baptized. Then his turn came



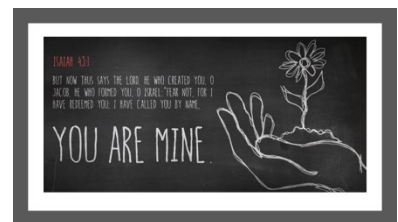
up. Here is how Luke describes it in verse 21: *“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...”* Just like that – Jesus is baptized. That’s the whole story in Luke’s gospel. He spends so little time on the actual baptism because what happens next is the important part. The same is true for you and me. Don’t get me wrong, its neat and all that we were baptized. But what happens next matters.

Continuing on in verse 21 and into 22, we read, “... *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.’*”



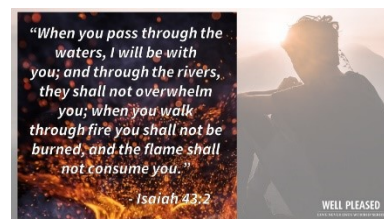
Although the heavens did not open in the same way when you or I were baptized and although there was not a physical manifestation of God’s Spirit descending upon us after we were baptized, I do believe that God whispers the same things over our lives when we are marked in the waters of baptism. As we had water sprinkled or poured over our heads or as we were dipped or immersed in the water, I believe that God whispers these same words into our hearts: “You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” As each of us are marked with the water of baptism, God says, “I love you.” God speaks these words of affirmation into our hearts; God covers our lives with these words of love.

These words of love are echoed in our passage from Isaiah 43. As we turn to this passage, we begin with verse one: “*But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. You are mine.’*” These words of God, these words of



love for God’s people, were spoken about 700 years before the birth of Christ. God was reiterating the same message that was spoken over Jesus, the same message that is spoken over us when we are baptized: “I love you.” These words of love are words of promise. When God says, “*You are mine*,” God is telling us that we will always belong to God, that we will always be loved.

The foundations of this covenant, this no-matter-what, unconditional love are echoed in the next verse. In verse two we read, *“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.”* Come what may – water, rivers, fire, flames – no worry, God will be with us. Come what may – death, grief, loss, sickness, change, pain, sorrow – no worry, God will be with us. The Lord our God, the holy one of Israel, is our Savior.



As we turn back to our passage from Luke 3, we pick up threads of this prophetic voice as we delve into verse 17. Here John speaks of the baptism of fire that Jesus will bring. Part of walking with the Lord, part of being in a relationship with Jesus, is the constant call to be like him. At times this is reminiscent of baptism, of entering those waters that cleanse us. The traditional practice of immersion reflected the idea of dying to our old self as one was immersed in the watery grave of baptism, only to emerge clean and pure, born again as a new creation of God. Each time we come to Jesus and offer our words of confession and our pledge of repentance, we are symbolically being cleansed, made new again through Christ’s mercy and grace and forgiveness.

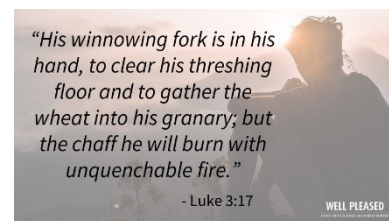
At times the transformation that God works in us is like a river that suddenly flows all around us. Like a flooding river, this working of God quickly surrounds us and can often make us feel like we are about to drown in those waters. This was my experience back in February of 2012, when God said it is time to move.

The thought of leaving the church that my family and I had been a part of for 23 years was overwhelming. Emotions washed over us like a flood. Even though I felt like I would be overwhelmed, swept under at any moment, God was faithful. God walked with us through those next few days and weeks and months. Over and over, in spite of my fears and doubts, over and over God said, “You are mine. I love you.” We have all had experiences when we have felt at the edge of being overwhelmed or when we have been overwhelmed. In those times, we have all had God come alongside of us, walk with us, and whisper in our heart, “You are mine. I love you.”

Sometimes the transformation that God works in us feels like a fire instead of a flood. Something or someone intervenes in or impacts our lives and we are beset by the flames. Often it is the fire within roused by the evil one as jealousy or anger or pride or contempt or being judgmental rises up inside of us, sometimes causing us to simmer and fester, sometimes driving us to want to erupt or explode like a volcano. For me, this fire has often been one that ultimately works to refine me, to burn away that which was displeasing to God. Again, we have all experienced times when the fires of Satan flare up, challenging our efforts to control our tongue or our actions or our thoughts. We’ve all been tempted to lash out or to release those emotions. It is then that we most need the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit to remind us that we are all God’s children, that we are all beloved. To connect to Luke 3:17, it is the chaff of my soul that has burned up by Jesus’ unquenchable fire.

In Luke 3:17 John describes Jesus' baptizing fire this way:

"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." John is talking about both the



present day as well as about the end of time. During his time on earth, Jesus will call all to repentance and to living with a servants' heart. This call to holy and faithful living continues to go out to all who choose to follow Jesus in this present age – to you and to me.

These words are also about the future, about a day that is yet to come. These words are also about the final day of judgement. On that day, when Jesus returns in glory, he will gather the faithful into heaven, the granary. On that day he will also send the unfaithful into the burning, unquenchable fire of hell.

For many outside the world of faith, these words sound harsh and maybe even cruel. For those living without Christ as the Lord of their lives, yes, this does not sound like a pleasant end to this life. To those living without a relationship with Jesus, these words do not invoke an image of a loving God. Yet for those who believe, for those of us who are loved by the one who created us, who are loved by the one who formed us, who are loved by the one who called us, who are loved by the one who led us into the waters of baptism, who are loved by the one who made us his own, who are loved by the one who has called us to walk daily as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ – these are words of love and hope and promise.

For those of us living in a personal relationship with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, these are words that call us ever towards an eternity in God's loving and glorious presence. There in God's presence we will know that we are a child of God, loved beyond our understanding.

When we choose to live as a child of God, to walk daily as a part of the body of Christ, on each day that draws us closer to that day in glory, God whispers over and over, "You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased... You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased... You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased..." My friends, we are the children of God. We are loved. Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.



GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you think back over your journey of faith, when have you heard of felt God say, 'I love you?' Of these experiences, which are stories that you could share to encourage others in their faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Where do you sense the Spirit working to refine you? How can you bring this to God in prayer, asking for work to be done in your life?
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 3:11-17 and John 1:24-34. How do these readings inform your understanding of baptism? How do they speak to your baptism?