

Precious in God's Sight
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Isaiah 43:1-7

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.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
4 Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
5 Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
6 I will say to the north, 'Give them up',
and to the south, 'Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
7 everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.'

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, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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, ²²and 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.'

Professor Rick Nutt says of our reading from Isaiah, "Although Isaiah wrote to the people of Israel, the Christian may correctly apply the gift of liberation to all people. The divine message, says verse 7, is for 'everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and

made.’ All creation, and therefore all people, is the result of God’s love. It only follows that God’s saving acts are also meant for all people...Differences are real and important and should be admitted. The message of the Bible is that in God those differences are transcended – not eliminated – in the gracious power of love.”¹ As we approach the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, beginning this Friday, no finer words could have been chosen.

For the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, local churches of other denominations have planned an event of prayer, learning, and worship for this afternoon, the details of which are in your bulletin. While I wish it weren’t so, this intentional week of prayer is not superfluous. There is still a need for us to consciously work toward and pray for unity. Just yesterday, not 30 years ago but yesterday, fighting broke out in Northern Ireland between a group of mainly Protestants, loyal to the United Kingdom, and Catholic Irish nationalists.² At least twenty-nine people were injured. Yesterday. Saturday. Yet on Sunday, in their separate churches, they worship the same triune God. We worship the same triune God. We may do it differently but God does not change, the God who formed and made us, the God who created us for God’s glory.

We had a training session yesterday for the incoming elders and deacons who will be ordained and installed shortly. One of the topics we discussed was the hallmarks of our government, one of which is the connectional nature of our polity. 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us that while we are many members, we are part of the same body. The Presbyterian Church (USA) attempts to live out this understanding of the larger church by joining with other denominations to accomplish God’s work whenever we can. We acknowledge that there is no “individual” church, but that we are, rather, in relationship with other churches. “Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made” – not just the Presbyterians or the Episcopalians or the Methodists – everyone, for we have all been formed by God, created for God’s glory.

As Professor Nutt wrote, “The message of the Bible is that in God those differences are transcended – not eliminated – in the gracious power of love.”³ Differences are good. The apostle Paul reminds us that we would be of no use if we were all eyes or all ears. Nowhere in any of the gospels is Jesus ever quoted as saying, “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” So in a few minutes, we’ll celebrate, because of the gracious power of love, the differences within our own small body of Christ, a small part of the much larger body of Christ, which goes beyond even Presbyterian borders. The people whom you have elected to represent this congregation have some obvious differences – male / female, working / retired, Democrat / Republican - I know there’s even a Bears fan lurking in their midst

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 222.

² <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/sns-rt-us-irish-protestsbre90b0d3-20130112.0.6734094.story>, 12 January 2013.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 222.

(although I'm not at liberty to share who) – and those differences only scratch the surface. Each and every one of them, just as with each and every one of you, is precious in God's sight. You are honored and God loves you. Take that in. You are precious in God's sight, and honored, and God loves you. Every one of you. You are precious in God's sight. You are honored. God loves you.

Do not fear, for God has redeemed you; God has called you by name, you are God's. When you pass through the waters, God will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. It is no accident that these words of assurance to the captive and exiled Israel are paired with a baptism story of Jesus. A freed Israel returning from Babylon would need to cross the Jordan River to return to Jerusalem, where God's temple was, and so where God's people belonged. Jesus steps into the same Jordan to free them, and all peoples, once again and forever. These people are represented as we read, "Now when all the other people were baptized," not "those whose descendants would become Presbyterian or Disciples of Christ or even Baptist" – simply "all the other people."

Theologians have long debated the meaning of Jesus being baptized, especially with "all the other people," and more specifically, they have debated the meaning of Jesus seeking John's baptism, a baptism of repentance. Jesus was without sin so there was nothing from which to repent on his part. Why would he take part in being washed clean of a sin he did not commit? It is, of course, because of the same reason for which he lived a life as all the people do, the same reason he suffered persecution and death. Because we are precious in his sight. We are honored. We are loved.

When we participate in the ordaining and installing of ruling elders and deacons, we will remember our baptismal vows. We do this not to dwell on the reasons why we need to be cleansed, the shortcomings we have, the insecurities, the doubts, the times we have turned away from God. Those are not the reasons why we are baptized, not the goal of baptism, merely an impetus. John preached a baptism of repentance not so all the people baptized would continue to think on the things for which they were repenting. Repentance is to turn *back* to God and a baptism of repentance focuses on the ways in which we are new, the ways in which we receive a fresh start through the gracious power of love. A baptism of repentance reminds us who, and whose, we truly are: those called by God's name, those created for God's glory, those who God formed and made. Turning toward God is accepting the truth that we are precious in God's sight, that we are honored, that we are loved. Turning toward God naturally results in joyfully serving Christ, through mission, through ministry.

And so today, as we remember the baptism of the Lord, we specifically remember, too, those who have agreed to serve Christ through mission and through the specific ministries of elders and deacons. God has called them by name, and we will do the same. And we all participate in this ordination and installation which God has initiated. We will ask of them questions re-affirming the

vows made at their baptisms. And before the ordination and installation are considered complete, we, too have questions to answer. “Do we, the members of the church, accept these men and women as ruling elders and deacons, chosen by God through the voice of this congregation to lead us in the way of Jesus Christ?” “Do we agree to pray for them, to encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ who alone is Head of the Church?” Let us begin in praying for them now.

Let us pray: Loving God, we are ever thankful that we are precious in your sight and we ask that a special measure of your wisdom, strength, and grace be poured out upon these people whom we have elected to lead us for the full length of their terms. Amen.