

## **Isaiah 43:1-7**

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.  
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.  
For I am the Lord your God,  
    the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
    Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.  
Because you are precious in my sight,  
    and honoured, and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
    nations in exchange for your life.  
Do not fear, for I am with you;  
    I will bring your offspring from the east,  
    and from the west I will gather you;  
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—  
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, <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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, <sup>22</sup>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.’

## A New Kind of Baptism

You know, as I get older I seem more set in my routines. Some routines are good – *usually* I wake up early on Mondays through Fridays, and come to the church to pray, and usually I pray before I go to bed; *usually* my wife and I sit down to breakfast together, and we usually talk about each other's day when she arrives home in the evening. I take out the dog and feed him and check the bird's food situation every morning. Around this time each year I start thinking about putting away the Christmas decorations. Sometime in February or March I do my taxes. In summer I take a vacation, hopefully with my wife. Some routines are things you have to do (prepare taxes), and some you just continue doing because you find them enjoyable.

The church too has routines, as do mosques and temples and synagogues. Aside from the weekly worship services, there's the order of the worship services, the sermon, the offering, the readings, the benediction. We have yearly routines, like Easter and Christmas, Lent and Advent, All Saints Day and Ascension Sunday. If you grew up in the church, or you have been coming consistently for however long, you'll know some of these routines. If you've really been paying attention, you'll know that the pastor is not just randomly picking out scripture passages and writing sermons based upon whatever he feels like talking about; in the church year, which begins with Advent, there are different things that we emphasize at different times of the year; during Advent we look toward the coming of Jesus, during Lent we look to the cross, the path that led Jesus there, and Easter marks the resurrection and the validation of who Jesus is and of all that he said. And once that's over we coast our way into summer and take a long celebratory vacation ☺.

We have actually entered a season called Epiphany, which will last until Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, which, because Easter is a lunar holiday, falls at different times each year. This year it falls on February 10<sup>th</sup>, so it's a very short season of Epiphany this year; five weeks. The “bookends” for this short season of Epiphany are *the Baptism of the Lord Sunday* (which commemorates Jesus' baptism) and *Transfiguration Sunday*, which commemorates the Transfiguration, that time that Jesus took a few of his disciples up on the mountain where they would witness Jesus transform into a dazzling bright shiny *glorified* person and enjoy a little social hour with Moses and Elijah. The reason that these two events are the “bookends” of the season of Epiphany is that they mark the beginning and the beginning of the end of Jesus' ministry; after his baptism Jesus would go off into the wilderness for 40 days then begin proclaiming and healing and miracling, and just after the Transfiguration he would “sets his eyes on Jerusalem,” the place where he will be murdered and resurrected. That's why I say that the Transfiguration is the *beginning* of the end of Jesus' ministry, because he still healed and taught and miracled after that, but his mind was fixed on the cross, on that very painful task that he had to complete, and thus we begin Lent after Transfiguration Sunday. But there is another way to see Transfiguration Sunday, and in a sense a more definitive “bookend;” Transformation Sunday marks the day that Jesus' closest disciples saw him in a new way. They saw Jesus as they had never seen him before, and quite frankly they were terrified. But this should be our trajectory not only during this season of Epiphany but throughout our lives. We progress from the time we enter the church, which officially occurs with *our baptism*, to the point where we come to see Jesus for who he is, dazzling, shiny, *glorified*, and like Thomas we can declare with exuberance “My Lord and my God!”

I began the sermon by talking about routines. Knowing about the church year and the church seasons and the church routines can make us feel pretty proud about knowing why we do different things at different times, and it may help you better-understand the things we do and sermons I give, *but the bigger point* is that all of this leads us to *change*. What's wrong with you? Why do you have to change?

Well I might get in trouble telling you what you have to change; it's better for you to determine what you need to change with the goal being that you know God and love God more than you do right now.

But routines don't always help you do that. One of the bad things about routines is that you can get stuck in them and never really get to a better place. I can tell you that there are four ways that I can become a better person (that's a joke; there are way more than four ways!), but if I got relaxed in a church where people like me and supported me and I just said and did the same things all the time, nothing would change, and it's possible that I wouldn't grow spiritually. Because it's a human tendency to *resist* change. We find a place of comfort, and we want to remain there, and protect that place, and we resist changes that take us away from that place of comfort, and there are plenty of people in pulpits and in pews, who resist change, who have become complacent with the church and where they fit into it. And because they are content with where they are, they never reach that mountain, they never venture to the top with Jesus and never have that dazzling experience of seeing Jesus as he truly is.

One way that church routines can play into our resistance to change, our resistance to *grow*, is when we make the same sacrifice every single Lent ("Okay, it's Lent again. Time for me to lay off the drinking for 40 days"). You feel good about yourself while you're resisting the temptation to drink, and you're proud of yourself when the end comes around and you say, "I made it," but are you any different year to year?

Today we begin our Epiphany journey with baptism, a very appropriate place to begin, because baptism is the beginning of our walk in faith as it was for Jesus. There used to be people (maybe there still are?) who thought upon baptism as a one-time washing of all your sins, so people would put it off until they were on their death bed. Now I have to ask you, *do you think that people who believe such tripe are growing in Christ? Are they become more patient, more loving, more faithful?* It doesn't sound that way; sounds like there just getting power-washed before entering the pearly gates – that way they remain pearly.

And while baptism is not a once-and-for-all-cleansing of all accumulated sins, and while baptism does not provide you with any special advantage when it comes to entering the presence of God, who doesn't look at your resume anyway, ***it is important!*** It's important because it sets you apart! As a child (who won't remember any of this) is doused with that very holy water, as that water touches that child, it says to God, "She is yours; he is yours," and God says back, "She is beautiful; he is adorable; *they are beloved,*" and we, the church, becomes that child's extended support group. I am so in awe of the young parents in this church, because they are woven together. I see it on Facebook; they support one another, work together to watch each other's children so that they can grow together. And you help other in ways just as important as caring for your children; God is working in you and through you, and he is certainly not done with you! You're young! Who knows what changes you'll "grow" through and where those changes will carry you, all the time you are bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit – the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and *self-development*. Baptism brings you into this community, this family in Christ, and it's a community which ideally should be supportive and honest to the point where you might feel a little discomfort – I call those growing pains because spiritual growth is very often painful.

You see, the journey only starts with baptism, the time and place where you are surrounded by love, but you grow in Christ. And the community that has vowed to surround you with Christ's love nurtures the child until that time of commitment, of confirmation, when the child is able to say of her own free will, "Yes, Lord, I will follow you." And as you continue your walk with Christ, trial after trial, struggle after struggle, through minefields and jungles of wilderness *you grow!* You grow in love for your enemies, joy

of vocation and recreation, peace with the entire world, patience in all things, kindness to all, goodness to overcome the bad, faithfulness in your marriage and other relationships, and in *egkrateia*...many people mis-translate this as “self-control” as if there’s a little Moses inside you holding a couple tablets, and shaking his finger at you saying, “Thou shalt not...!” Another translation may be self-development, because I don’t believe he created us to be controlled but rather to be **free!** I believe that God created us to have dreams and to want to excel in all things and that God will faithfully remain with you when you explore new horizons, because that’s the way God is. Sin is what holds us back from that freedom to go and do whatever. But God has another path for you. Baptism starts us down a road to freedom that will lead in five weeks to a transfiguration. No, you’re not going to morph into some Terminator cop; you will see Jesus brighter and clearer than ever before, and your response will be that of a disciple.

Because the only thing that can bring us to a point of discipleship that can keep us walking down those very dark roads that lead to nasty crosses, is to have strong faith in Christ, and one gains that faith when one can see Christ as he truly is, God incarnate, dazzling and spectacular. Then we can walk wherever God leads us. May your walk of faith, that really began with your baptism, lead you to that mountaintop experience of Jesus Christ. Amen.