



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
January 13th, 2019
Sermon: "Accompaniment"
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

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

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. 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, 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."

~

In 1964, Bobby Vinton crooned his way to No. 1 with these words:
"Lonely, I'm Mr. Lonely, I have nobody to call my own...."

Loneliness resonates across the generations.

A recent Cigna Study found that nearly half of all Americans today struggle with loneliness.

One in four of us feel as if no one can truly understand us.

And one in five report that we don't have people in our lives that we can really talk to.

Even living under the same roof, roommates and families can feel isolated from each other – especially single parents, who are having to take constant care of little ones.

The study found that the loneliest generation is in fact, Generation Z (ages 18-22).

And even in this time of social media, where we can have hundreds of *Facebook* friends or *Instagram* followers, nearly half of all social media users still struggle with feelings of intense loneliness - and a longing for meaningful relationships.ⁱ

America's battle with loneliness has only intensified throughout the generations. We have become an increasingly individualistic society - evermore unwilling to lean on each other or welcome each other in. Not only does this decrease our social capital (our ability to be more productive), but there are repercussions for the psyche. It is a terrible feeling – to feel alone.

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert D. Putnam writes,
“*For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago — silently, without warning — that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities.*”ⁱⁱ

~

Our gospel writers knew much about feeling torn apart from community. They were each living in a tension-filled time, trying to hold fast to their Judaism, while laying down the foundation for Christian faith.

Each of them was speaking into a particular moment, to a particular audience. That being said, *all* of them recognized the importance of Jesus' baptism story – and *all* were sure to include it (each with their own spin, of course):

Mark's account is short and sweet,
for Matthew the “*angel's*” in the details,
John paints a heavenly picture of Lord Jesus,
and Luke (our gospel writer today) is the one who recognizes baptism
as something that shapes and is shaped by community.

Luke writes: “*Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...*”

In this gospel, Jesus does not come to the river alone,
nor does he arrange a time to meet privately with his cousin, John.
Jesus comes to the waters of baptism when all the people are stepping in.

“*All the people...*”

Luke does not say that Jesus asked to be baptized alongside those of greatest faith or status.
Luke does not say that Jesus comes to the water surrounded by his dearest friends.
Luke does not say that Jesus checks his surrounds to be sure none of his critics or enemies are in sight. Luke simply says when all the people were being baptized, and there, Jesus was also.

There beside the river, Jesus meets the whole community:

the powerful ready to let go and the powerless hungry for hope,
the tax-collector and the beggar,
the adulteress and the newlywed,
the child and the parent,
the lonely, and the lost, and the forgotten.

And it is here, in the midst of a fractured community – hungry for God’s renewing grace -
that Jesus finds us, takes our hand, and accompanies us into the water.

~

Writer, Susan Katz Miller grew up with an Episcopalian mother and Jewish father. Although her mom promised to raise her children Jewish, when her daughter was just a week old, she couldn’t help herself and secretly baptized her in the kitchen sink. Susan recalls, “I think Mom simply wanted to hedge her bets, to give me every possible protection.”

Weeks later, not knowing what Susan’s mother had done, her grandmother quietly performed her second baptism in her own kitchen sink.

And then soon after, her aunt graced Susan with a third private baptism in the family tub.

Susan never learned about this until she grew up. At that point, all she could do was laugh and feel a bit *verklemt* by this bold and covert gesture. In her heart of hearts, she knew that these women (so dear to her life) did this from a place of love – however wild it was.ⁱⁱⁱ

~

As Presbyterians, we do not perform covert 007 baptisms.
For us, baptism is not a medical vaccine or holy shield of armor,
rather it is a sign and seal of God’s infinite grace already alive and moving within us -
claiming us and freeing us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Presbyterians understand baptism as a sacrament that we cannot perform in the privacy of our homes or kitchen sinks. Although it is deeply personal and individual it is also corporate and communal – much like the Christian life itself. We cannot baptize alone and we cannot be Christians alone.

We know that here at our church, when someone is baptized, they come before this community. And we come ready to witness and celebrate the ways God is *already* at work in the life of this infant, or child, or youth, or adult.

Together, we welcome them by name and through water mark them as God’s own forever:
as one who lives and dies in Christ,
as a cherished child of this eternal faith family that will not let us go.

Together, we celebrate who we are and whose we are. We are followers of God's beloved son "with whom God is well pleased." And we recognize our mutual responsibility to support each other in our pain, in our joys, in our growth side-by-side - as siblings made one, made whole in Christ.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes about wholeness felt in community,
"It can become impossible to make meaningful distinctions between God and other people, trees or anything else in creation. Everything that exists, exists in this wholeness. Everything that lives, lives in this light. This is the one community that matters, one that is whole - one toward which all others reach."^{iv}

~

Dylan Marron has made his living making humorous, profound videos that deal with a wide range of social justice issues: everything from mass incarceration, to gun violence, to the hardships LGBTQ youth face daily. As an outspoken, openly gay man, Dylan receives a fair share of hate mail. People troll him online writing mean and threatening remarks.

When Dylan first began to receive these negative comments, his first instinct was to tease back – to poke fun at their grammatical errors or ridiculous original slurs. But after a while, Dylan decided that this wasn't doing any good. The next time he received a hateful message, he decided to write back and ask if they could talk.

"What is your name?" Dylan said over Skype.

"It's Josh" the man responded.

"I would just like to understand why did you write that threatening message to me, Josh?"

"I feel kinda bad about it now." He said, "But I don't agree with the videos you make. I was trying in those messages to tell you how I felt, but I guess I insulted you instead. Maybe not the best approach. To be honest, I didn't even think you'd read it."

Dylan asked, "Have you ever been bullied before - in the form of that message that you sent me?"

Josh paused. "Every day of my life. I go to school, I come home and I am alone. I don't have friends to go out with or people to see - and then I receive all these messages - like the one I sent you."

"It hurts to be treated that way, doesn't it?" Dylan quietly asked.

"I am just so used to it," said Josh. "I am so angry at the world. I'm so lonely. I just took it out on you, I guess. Sorry about that."

Dylan had no idea what to expect from the call, but for a few brief moments, these two unlikely companions seemed to step into the water together - dipping their toes into life-saving grace and understanding.

~

Friends, in a world of intense isolation, of chronic feelings of loneliness, Jesus Christ, God's beloved, bursts in through the power of the Holy Spirit and invites us into a new kind of community:
one that is not of our own making or imagining,
but one that is created, and shaped, and blessed by God...

A community of believers of varying stripes and colors, perspectives and stories, shortcomings and growing edges.

A community where we are vulnerable and accountable to one another, where we trust like never before and dare to hold each other tight.

A community where we will stop at nothing to build up God's kin-dom.

God says:

*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.*

Siblings in Christ, God welcomes us – as we are – out of isolation and toward the dangerous, chaotic, freeing, refreshing, life-saving water.

It is there that God accompanies us and invites us to bear our brokenness together, and through the promise of baptism, leads us towards wholeness and healing for *all people*.

Remember your baptism.
Remember our baptism.
Christ accompanies us to the river
Christ calls us to each other
So come. Come, beloved child of God.

ⁱ Polack, Ellie. *Research Puts Spotlight on the Impact of Loneliness in the U.S. and Potential Root Causes*. Cigna Newsroom. 01 May 2018. <<https://www.cigna.com/newsroom/news-releases/2018/new-cigna-study-reveals-loneliness-at-epidemic-levels-in-america>>

ⁱⁱ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks. 2000. pg. 27

ⁱⁱⁱ Katz Miller, Susan. *Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family*. Boston: Beacon Press. 2013. pg. 1

^{iv} Brown Taylor, Barbara. *An Alter in the World: A Geography of Faith*. New York: Harper One. 2009. pg. 92