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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA
Baptism of our Lord Sunday
January 9, 2022— on Zoom
Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15–17, 21–22*

I don't know about you, but this week I've been feeling a little emotionally "off." I'm sure it's partly due to the fact that we've gone backwards in terms of Covid and have had to move our ministry and worship back online. Partly I think it was due to seeing images and hearing stories again of what happened last January 6 in our nation's capital. Partly I think it was the feeling of being immobile several days due to the recent snow and ice. And, of course, the short days and long nights don't help.

And I don't know about you, but when I feel off like this, my mind and heart tend to just spiral. When things around me make me feel unmoored, I don't feel good about what I'm doing and, even more tragically, I don't feel good about who I am.

Now I admit this to you not because I want your sympathy, but I want you to know that if you have been feeling this way, too, you're not alone. Some of us feel this way all the time, even when it's not Covid- or political- or weather-related, and if that's the case, I pray that you reach out to a counselor or life coach—and I am happy to provide you with names and contact information for professionals in our area.

But it's helpful to remember that everyone feels emotionally off sometimes, and I am hoping today as we look at these scripture texts, we might realize where God is in all of this, and how remembering our baptism can bring our focus back to who we really are and what God wants for us.

It's probably comforting to know that many times in scripture, God's people also felt "off," either because of what they had done or left undone, or because of what had been done to them. The context of the reading we heard today from Isaiah is a people in exile. The Israelites had been taken into exile in Babylon for not trusting and worshiping the

one God. They had just passed through literal and figurative waters and fires. They are feeling guilt and shame. And yet, this is what God says to them:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

²When 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.

³For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you,

In the midst of nothing going right, God says you are still mine and precious in my sight and I love you. It's interesting: there are only 13 times that the phrase "I love you" appears in the Bible—12 of those times are people speaking to God—but this verse in Isaiah 43 is the only place in scripture in which God says "I love you" to the Israelites, and to us. When your life feels off—when you aren't in the literal or emotional place you wish you were—that's when God speaks the clearest to you: I love you. You are mine. I am never letting you go. I am with you and will protect you. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.

Life can at times honestly suck, including when bad things are happening because it's our fault, and God still loves us. No amount of unfaithfulness or uneasiness or unmooring keeps God's love from us. It is when we are most "off" that God is most "on."

I thought about this on Friday after I dropped Tae off at school and went to walk Taylor dock to Boulevard Park in Bellingham. That was the morning that the king tides were so high and the winds out of the west so strong that it caused flooding in Birch Bay. I thought about the fact that roiling waters matched how I felt inside. But when I was splashed by the cold waters heaved upon the dock by the wind and waves, I was hit with the reminder that in baptism all the icky stuff that keeps us apart from God, and all the things that make us feel off and bad about

ourselves, is drowned, and we are raised to new life, even when life is roiling around us.

I love in this gospel text what John says about Jesus: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 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.” Often this has been understood as the good people will be gathered into Jesus’ arms and the bad people will go burn in hell. But what if that’s not what John is saying at all? What if in baptism Jesus preserves what is valuable and destroys what is worthless in each of our lives, just like a farmer winnows her wheat?

Because we know that in our baptism, as Martin Luther says, “the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

I wonder when Jesus prayed after he had been baptized, if this is what he prayed about. Yes, Jesus was God with skin on (as I tell our preschoolers) and seen as sinless, but what if even Jesus prayed for God to preserve what was valuable in him and release the rest? To remember who he was at his core, and to let go of everything that kept him from God. I wonder if that can be our daily prayer, too, when we remember our baptism.

What if every day, we dipped our finger in water and made the sign of the cross on our forehead and remembered this promise from our baptism: I am sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. What if we believed that in doing so our identity as God’s beloved child was more important than anything else, and the rest—all the stuff that makes us feel bad about ourselves, all the stuff that pulls us from God—is released.

Go ahead and do that now if you have a bowl of water near you. Dip your finger in the water and make the sign of the cross on your

forehead and say, even out loud, “I am sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”

Because you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with Christ, your identity is clear—you are God’s child, and nothing else is more important. In fact, all the things we think and believe that are counter to that—that we don’t do enough and aren’t good enough—all those parts of our “old self” are drowned, and as Luther says, a new person comes forth and rises up to live before God. We aren’t unmoored anymore, and even when life is roiling around us, our focus is returned to the ways of life that bring peace, hope, and joy.

Today we will affirm our baptism after we profess our faith using the Apostle’s Creed. It’s the same words that our confirmation students use when they are confirmed, when they affirm their baptism. In those words, we say we intend to continue in the covenant God made with us in holy baptism:

to live among God’s faithful people,
to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper,
to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,
and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

Notice that all those things involve community: living, hearing, proclaiming, serving, and striving all involve other people. Our baptism not only confirms our value in God’s eyes but also confirms our place in community. And in community, especially the community of the church, we are reminded that we are valued and loved, and all the chaff burns away.

My dear friends in Christ, when you are feeling emotionally off, when you aren’t feeling good about what you do or even who you are, remember God’s clear words to you: You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Remember your baptism, your identity as a child of God, your place in community. For you are beloved, and with you, God is well pleased. Amen.