

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now, says the Lord—
the one who created you, Jacob,
the one who formed you, Israel:
Don't 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;
when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched
and flame won't burn you.
³ I am the Lord your God,
the holy one of Israel, your savior.
I have given Egypt as your ransom,
Cush and Seba in your place.
⁴ Because you are precious in my eyes,
you are honored, and I love you.
I give people in your place,
and nations in exchange for your life.
⁵ Don't fear, I am with you.
From the east I'll bring your children;
from the west I'll gather you.
⁶ I'll say to the north, "Give them back!"
and to the south, "Don't detain them."
Bring my sons from far away,
and my daughters from the end of the earth,
⁷ everyone who is called by my name
and whom I created for my glory,
whom I have formed and made.

Acts 8:14-17

14 When word reached the apostles in Jerusalem that Samaria had accepted God's word, they commissioned Peter and John to go to Samaria. 15 Peter and John went down to Samaria where they prayed that the new believers would receive the Holy Spirit. (16 This was because the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) 17 So Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

15 The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. 16 John replied to them all, "I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." 21 When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened 22 and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Happy New Year, and blessed Epiphany to each of you! Christmas is over officially over now, and yet we still dwell within the seasons of Christ's light. Epiphany is a season when we celebrate the enlightenment of God appearing to all nations, to all people, to everyone, in and through Jesus. What good news! Such good news of God's brightness begins our new calendar year. Though we don't hear it in our readings today, Wednesday was the festival of Epiphany, where we celebrate the magi's visit Jesus, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That's a sign of epiphany, that foreign wisdom recognized the illumination of God's wisdom in the Christ child. We see another sign of Epiphany today in Luke, where we see Jesus

named publicly as God's son during his baptism in the Jordan River. We're surrounded by epiphanies, so to speak.

This is a good place to start afresh for a new year. In the most general sense, an epiphany is a sudden realization of something you hadn't comprehended before, or a moment of clarity that flashes into your path. It's new light, new knowledge, new wisdom. I remember the epiphany I had about our call to come here to Christ Lutheran. Michelle and I had interviewed a few places, and were still interviewing at a few others. Each of these places was different, and each of them was attractive for some reason. We didn't dislike any of the options. But we knew each time that something wasn't quite right.

Then, we received the paperwork for CLC from Bishop Mauney. Even as I was reading it, something was just right about it. There was a blessed assurance, before I'd met any of you, that God was at work in the midst of this place,

these people, and my call to ministry. I held it in my hands, and I knew this was God's call for us. It was an epiphany, and one that I'll cherish my whole life long.

Now we're over fourteen months into this call together, and we've come to an incredibly crucial time. This year is, in many ways, the year that will determine the shape of our future, that will decide the form of ministry CLC takes. Now, that might sound daunting, but hear this clearly. That's not a bad thing! We're living in an extended time of discernment right now. We're living in the tension between who we used to be as a congregation and who God's calling us to become. We only know for sure what we were before, and we don't yet fully know what we're called to be, but that can be an exciting, life-giving time!

To make the best of this opportunity, to focus our spirits upon God's kingdom and God's mission, we need epiphanies. We need wisdom. We need clarity. We need a

vision for a way forward. So, we're entering a sermon series, a longer one, on vision for this year. For the next five weeks, until Lent begins on February 14th, we'll be exploring the kinds of vision that God might have in store for us in this year. Each of these sermons will conclude with a few questions meant to inspire conversation during our Fellowship time after church, including the devotional focus question from our weekly email. In other words, we can't just talk about this during the sermon! To decide together what the future holds, we need to talk together about the future God has for us. This is part of an effort to unify our ministries together and align them with the purposes of discipleship: looking, loving, and living more like Jesus.

And that's the great thing about today's Scripture, for we get phenomenal insight into the person of Jesus in these few, short verses. The first clue we get comes from John, who tells us that Jesus, "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit

and fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." Yikes! Happy New Year, right? I don't know if you remember your baptisms, but I sure don't have any scars from a fire!

Seriously, though, John here's pointing to the fundamental nature of Jesus' mission. Baptism for John was just about repentance, about saying you were sorry. Baptism for Jesus is about transformation, about not just saying sorry for the past but also becoming an entirely new person for the future. Getting rid of the chaff, the husks, the meaningless stuff of life that prevents new growth, and becoming the fruitful, constructive creatures God made us to be in Eden. We're called to a life full of the Holy Spirit, full of fire that reveals the precious image of God in the midst of

our lives and the vibrant kingdom of God buried underneath the crust of this world.

We need the fire of God's epiphany to break through the mundane molds of everyday life, the destructive habits that hold us back from our Kingdom bound purpose, the disparaging thoughts that prevent us from seeing God's vision for the church. There is a Kingdom future, blessed future for our church, for this church here in Radford at 201 Harvey Street. Yes, for real. God's got something in store for us. Don't doubt that! But, know that it begins with a fire that burns away all of the garbage, even the garbage we like, even the stuff we don't think is garbage. The gossip. The judgmentalism. The envy and hatred and gluttony and greed. The desire to be well thought of instead of faithful. All the stuff that divides a community and prevents a community from fully enacting God's vision? That stuff will

burn away. That's the kind of fire, the kind of epiphany, that Jesus brings.

But it doesn't end there. The words that come from the heavens tell us something more about Jesus and more about God the Father. "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." Now, this language of sonship, of being a child of God, means lots of things. We often talk about it in terms of divinity, that Jesus being the Son of God means Jesus is divine, is in fact God. That's true, but that's not the only or even primary meaning of the story at this point in Luke. It's about being a child, an heir and familial friend, of God's mission in the world.

Think about children in terms of family identity. In ancient Israel, children inherited the family name, the family land, and often the family occupation. Remember that Jesus followed in Joseph's footsteps and became a carpenter or artisan of some sort. Ancient rulers needed

children to carry on their reign, their purposes, their power. Children carried on the empires, whatever the size, of their parents. Children carry on family names and legacies.

As Jesus embraces this life of Holy Spirit and fire, he does so as God's child, as one commissioned to carry on the Kingdom of God, to make God's legacy alive in the world. The Holy Spirit commissions Jesus to embody the fullness of God's identity, to spread the Kingdom spoken of by the prophets, promised by the Torah, and glimpsed by the people Israel. That's the other epiphany that comes alongside God's fire of transformation: God's purpose of God's children is to carry on God's kingdom.

That's why God the Father finds happiness in Jesus. "In you I find happiness," because Jesus embodies the transformation and purpose of God's kingdom. We, too, are called to that life, to receive God's transformation, to live into God's kingdom, to bring happiness to our Father in

heaven. The vision that we need for this year begins with our identities alongside Jesus as children of God.

As children, we carry our parents' DNA. That unmistakable yet hidden stuff that constitutes our physical being and provides the foundation for the ways that we grow comes from our parents. From our hair color to body shape to metabolic function and brain activity, our parents shape who we are. More than just science, the culture, the family values of our parents, also help to shape who we become. Praying at meals, saying please and thank you, speaking a certain language, wearing certain clothes, having certain values. We receive that from our parents as well.

As children of God, we receive the DNA of God in baptism as the Holy Spirit becomes inextricably linked to our bodies and souls. As children of God, we become shaped by God's culture through Scripture, through life in the

church. What this also means is that, at a fundamental level, we don't determine our own future if we want to be a part of God's kingdom. We still have a choice in the matter – we're not robots after all – but if we want to discover the future God has in store for us, we must live by the culture of God's kingdom, we must receive God's transformation. God shapes us through the sacraments and through life in our community, through these fires that intend to bring out the best of us that God created and to burn away the rest. In all things, we must allow the fire of God's change to reshape our lives.

So, as we launch into this year, we must ask a few questions: *What changes do we need to see in our own lives and in the life of CLC? Where do we need to see God's kingdom active in our world and our church? What's God mission and vision for us? What's your resolution in this new year related to life at CLC?* These questions will guide our

conversation as a church and discernment going into the future. **Reflect on those questions as we watch this video-poem that reflects upon Jesus' baptism, and our own baptisms.**

“Raise me up anew. Let redemption have its way.”

That's how the video we watched puts it, and I think that's pretty much perfect. Here in this new year, may God raise us up renewed as God's children. May God's redemption work within us to help us bear God's name in our community, to share God's legacy in our workplaces, to embody God's peace in our world. That's the vision we need, the vision as children of our Father in heaven. May God fuse our hearts with the heart of Jesus, that we too might come alive in this world and carry God's life to all that we meet. Amen.