

Isaiah 43:1-3a, 5-7 ~ Galatians 3:26-29

*Baptized for Good*

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sacrament of Baptism & Holy Communion

September 1, 2019

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*Introduction to Second Scripture:*

I have to begin by telling you: This is a first for me. Almost 22 years ago, I baptized Matthew Aaron Badillo and his brother Ben Ray, when they were 14 and 13 years old. Now today, we just baptized Matthew and our Emily's daughter, our first grandchild on both sides of the family, Isabel Rae Badillo. This was the first for me in my life as a pastor: to baptize two subsequent generations in one family. It's also a first for me, today on Sept. 1<sup>st</sup>, because this is my mom's birthday: the first one since her victory day on June 5<sup>th</sup> when she joined the church triumphant. Mom prayed long and hard that she would live long enough on this earth to hold a great grandchild in her arms. And her prayer was answered by the arrival of Isabel 17 months ago, when my mom was 94 years old.

As God will do, She gave Mom not one, but two great grandchildren before mom died: my sister Lynn's daughter Daphne, and her husband Calen, had a son Zedek, just 5 weeks after Isabel was born. As Mom loved to tell everyone, "and I got not only one, but two greatgrandchildren, a girl *and* a boy." Although in her last year her memory had failed to the point that she had trouble remembering the names of her four children, Mom *never* forgot that God had gifted her with not one, but two great grandchildren that she lived long enough to hold in her arms.

The scripture I am about to read was also a first. It comes from a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the very first church communities in Galatia, only about twenty years after Jesus' resurrection, in which he was likely quoting one of the first baptismal formulas ever used for a Christian baptism. But here's the rub. And the reason why Paul wrote this letter. The Galatians were not getting it. They were saying the words, going through the motions--but not really living into the life changing power of their baptism. And Paul was perturbed. To put it politely.

The reading you are about to hear from Galatians drops us like sky divers into the climax of Paul's rant to these churches in the Galatia region, better known as Paul's Letter to the Galatians. If Paul had not been so irate, this letter may never have been written. And we may never have known, that from the very first, the Holy Spirit Pentecost fire ignited a church born to baptize us into a whole new way of being where old divisions and differences no longer hold. Let's have a listen.

*Communion Meditation:*

One day when I was looking in a card shop for thank you notes, I stumbled upon a greeting card which said, "The only people who seem normal are the ones you don't know very well." Let's face it: aren't we all, to some degree, the abnormal products of dysfunctional families? Yes, we are the overwrought, the underprepared, the over-caffeinated, the sleep-deprived, the planners and the procrastinators, the players and the played, the duty-bound and

the distracted, the bemused and the bored, the angry, the anxious, the silly and the serious... did I leave anyone out?

Given that we tend to overplay or underplay our own idiosyncrasies, have you ever stopped and asked the question, "What does *God* really think of me?" If you do stop and listen to God's answer, you may be surprised. God knows you better than you know yourself. And still, God looks at you and sees the good and goodness in you. God has called you by name and says to you every day, no matter what you say or do, "You are still mine...Do not fear, I am still with you... Yes, you with all your quirks and questions."

Sometimes we look at ourselves and we don't know how this could possibly be true. Or we may ask, even if it is—what difference does it make if we can't touch or feel God's presence. That's where water, bread, and wine come in. Thank you, Jesus. Before Christ did his work on the cross, he took these three common substances, three things we *can* touch and taste and feel, and said: baptize with water in my name, eat this bread, drink this cup, commune in me with me. Use these earthly substances to claim your primary identity. Let the water, bread, and wine help you touch and taste the power that I am giving you to set you free from the divisions and differences, the hates and the hostilities that captivate and debilitate you. Use these three substances to touch and taste the power that I am giving you to reclaim your divine birthright.

First, the water. We'll get to the Table in a bit. The water of baptism is so utterly common and cosmic all at the same time! Good water is so common here in the USA that we take it for granted every time we get thirsty or dirty or need to cook: unless we live in Flint, Michigan or Newark, New Jersey or our power goes out. And then we remember again how we cannot live without it. The water of baptism is also cosmic: it connects us to the story of our vital, yet mystical connection to God. The water of baptism is Christ's gift to help us touch and feel this truth too big to really get our minds around.

In Isabel's moment of baptism this morning, and in ours, she and the rest of us we were sealed by the Holy Spirit, officially marked, as Christ's own forever. No slippage, no changing, no undoing this bond. We aren't left hanging out there alone. You belong to God for good. If you doubt this truth more often than you believe it, you are in good company. One man who doubted it was Martin Luther. That's right, Martin Luther, our church history hero back in 1517 let his discomfort and anger at how far his church had strayed from the Gospel of Christ propel him to post his 95 theses on the door of his hometown parish in Wittenberg. Another rant against the church for betraying its baptismal identity. But Martin Luther had another side. He was a man who battled despair and clinical depression his whole life. We are told that when the disease of depression had him in its grip, and he was trying to fight his way back to some semblance of normal, he would touch his own forehead to comfort himself, saying: "Baptismatus sum. Baptismatus sum." This was Latin that means "I am baptized. I am baptized."

Here's the thing: We are born with God's stamp of approval, and it cannot be removed. God's tattoo on our forehead. The water of baptism is our way of claiming a deep truth that is

already there before we know it. We belong to God in life and in death. Forever. Yes, indeed we are baptized for good.

We are also baptized *for* good. That is, we are baptized for the good of the world that Christ came to save. Living into our baptism, calls us out of our lesser selves in order to do God's work. To be Christ's hands and feet in this world. Yes: to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, to welcome the stranger, to let the oppressed go free. How are we doing with that? Are we letting our identity as God's beloved children, regardless of how normal or abnormal we may feel, free us to do God's kind of good? Or do we let other voices that are *not* God's determine our value and our agenda from day to day?

Sometimes it's hard to tell. But here are a few clues. If you trust the fresh start of cleansing forgiveness, God's gift of baptism is working in you and through. If you are able to hold back the sharp word, the hurtful glance, remembering that person is also God's beloved child, or if you resist the judgmental generalization, remember that group of people is loved by God *no more and no less than you*, that's a good sign you are living into your baptism. If you extend grace to the least deserving, you are kicking it, Jesus' style! If we work together to let the scales of white privilege, education privilege, or USA citizen privilege fall from our eyes, we are living into our baptismal identity.

In Jesus' time, people were born into a category that could not be changed. They were either Slave or free, either Jew or Gentile, male or female: separate never equal and that was that. This very first baptismal formula articulated something shockingly new. When baptized into Christ, it declared that all known anthropological divisions became one. Baptism in Christ washed away those dividing walls. Did you know that the earliest Christian baptisms were done naked? The person being baptized would remove all their clothes, step into the baptismal waters, and then be lifted out and clothed in white. This was a dramatic and visceral way to symbolize the washing away of old boundaries and instead being clothed in Christ, who frees us from these binary constructs. The baptized person is then challenged to shed and shuck off their instinct to value or devalue others according to race, class, or gender identity.

Does that sound pretty impossible? You may wonder how we will possibly break through the current polarities that seem to be getting worse every week. Some of us may have a rant ready to go just under our breath. I believe that there is a force at work to bring us together. That is why we are here today. Our "REUNIR" bracelet campaign, centers on this Spanish word that means "to bring together." I hear God telling us: Don't underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit working through us to bring together Immigrant children separated from their parents at the border, or to bring together climate activists like 16-year old Greta Thunberg, with climate change deniers, or to bring together Black Lives Matter activists with white nationalists, or to bring together gun control activists with NRA Second Amendment activists. We were baptized to do this work. We were baptized with the power that makes the impossible, possible.

We underestimate the power of water, of God's rivers of mercy to change the geography of our culture. You may recall the remarkable breakthrough story of Helen Keller. Before an illness she contracted when she was nineteen months old, (just a little older than Isabel) an illness that took away her ability to see, hear, or speak, she already knew a few words, including "water." As she later wrote, "I continued to make the sound for that word after all other speech was lost." The ground-breaking moment, when she learned to spell the word for water by signing it into her teacher's hand, was the event that unlocked the mystery of language for Helen. It happened at a well house on the Keller property in Alabama. Annie Sullivan, her teacher, had been trying over and over and over to connect for Helen the idea that the signing she was doing in her hand, stood for words of the objects all around them. All of a sudden, Helen wrote, "I knew that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. I left the well house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought."

I believe there is something about water, our baptismal water, that God can use to breakthrough our blindness and our deafness too. As weird a person as you may think you are, leverage your baptism to give you a new way of looking at yourself, and at the world around you. God's way. Through God's eyes. What a comfort and a challenge. No: none of us is "normal." But all of us deep down, whether we know it yet or not, are God's beloved children. Jesus lived and died to show us the way to live into and up to this truth: We are baptized for good.