

“In God’s Sight”

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January 13, 2019 – Baptism of the Lord

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

The emotion of these passages can’t be brushed aside because of familiarity. Isaiah is quoting God verbatim. Luke, also, quotes God verbatim. Well, as verbatim as it gets. Isaiah is speaking to the Israelites under Babylonian captivity. They have been attacked, plundered, dispersed, enslaved. They have been left without family, country, livelihood and hope. They have lost their name as God’s chosen people.

But God never loses his beloved. God doesn’t forget their name or to whom they belong. God redeems, ransoms and restores. Waters cannot overwhelm and fires cannot burn or consume. God’s people are worth saving. They were worth creating, after all.

In the New Testament Jesus, the ultimate ransom for the world, begins his ministry at the waters of baptism. Luke avoids the actual act of baptism but tells us about John’s huge success with the masses, his rebuke of being the Messiah, and foretelling who is on the way – the real deal. Once Jesus had been baptized, along with all the people, he prays and the heavens open, a dove descends, and God speaks, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

This is how God breaks through time and welcomes humanity in over and over again. Hence the UCC statement: God is still speaking.

This past week my father would have turned seventy-eight years old. He died when he was sixty. I would love to sit down and have a conversation with him today. He was an American Baptist Pastor, highly educated, intelligent and charismatic. He was also a man with feet of clay and those clay feet led him on some crooked paths in his lifetime.

Although raised in a conservative household in Zeeland, MI, once he began seminary in southern California in the early 1960’s, his conservative views began to change. A God of anger and judgment began to turn into a God of love and forgiveness. By the time I was old enough to wonder about the world, I found myself being raised in a house of good stories about Jesus, no talk of hell or the devil, and I sat in the pew every Sunday and heard lots of sermons about God’s love. Of course, sometimes my dad went on and on and I checked out. I began to think of my friends or homework or what we would have for Sunday dinner.

He told me once that he believed that God forgave and accepted us for who we are. I asked if God judged us. He never answered me.

He died of prostate cancer at the age of sixty. Because he was misdiagnosed at the age of fifty-five, he wasn’t diagnosed properly until it was too late. Before he died, he apologized to people he had hurt, mainly my mother and myself, without excuse. He took blame for his mistakes and made his peace. As odd as it may sound, he died with optimism and grace. He accepted his fate and the

only time I saw a tiny crack in his faith was once when he said quietly that the middle of the night was the worst time. He hated to be awake and left with his thoughts of dying.

You have met my son Wesley. You know his journey to South Africa will begin this week. He is also a man with feet of clay, but thus far he has traveled the straight paths of life. He is compassionate, thoughtful, careful, and always kind. He has lived in other countries and done good things. He cares about those who by no fault of their own are living lives harder than they should be. This new chapter will affirm and bring more wisdom and growth.

My dad baptized me when I was ten years old. I baptized Wesley when he was six months old, the day of my ordination into ministry. I was dunked. Wes was sprinkled with water from the river where Lydia gathered with her friends to worship. Read Acts 16. Lydia heard Paul preach about Jesus, believed, and was baptized with her entire household. I brought the water home after sitting by that river in Philippi, pregnant with Wes.

The point is this, baptism is a beautiful sign and seal of God's redeeming love. Jesus was baptized by his cousin. He began a ministry of redemption. After John's words about wheat and chaff and burning fire, he said this, "So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people." That has always made me smile. Scary, fiery, winnowing language counted as good news to John! Jesus quenched that language by inviting people into grace.

If my dad was alive, he would have things to say about the world today. I was raised in a home where politics were discussed. I knew why my dad voted for every democratic candidate. I knew what they stood for. My dad was pro-gay rights. He was pro-choice. He was pro-taking care of the poor. He was generous and understanding. That's where his faith led him. He would have harsh words for a government shut-down that disenfranchised those who already felt disenfranchised. He would rail against a government that chose to leave its' own people behind. His face would become grave as he encountered foolishness in leaders who were supposed to be wise. He would grieve as waters and fires overwhelmed those who could not escape.

But he would also repeat the verses from Isaiah. His optimism would win out. He would proclaim that we are all in God's sight.

That is a message that as a mother I want my son to know this week and every week of his life.

It's a message I want to remember at my most disheartening moments.

It's a message I want everyone here to believe.

We are never out of God's sight.

Beyond that, those who are most invisible in our country, those from other countries who are being mistreated inside our borders, those who don't know how they will make it without paychecks or backup plans or hope...they are in God's sight. But they may not know it.

It's our job to tell them. It's our job to get up from these pews this morning, leave this beautiful sanctuary, and find ways to ease the pain of those who are truly suffering.

We must rescue those caught in the flood waters. We must snatch those who are caught in the fires of hell on earth.

Some of us do this every day in our professions or personal lives. Public policy, government, church work, healthcare, social work, teaching, childcare, among others. There is an urgency to take our faith seriously and follow Jesus, who always took himself to places where the outcasts were, where the foreigners were, where the helpless were.

Would you like to know what else can be done to live out the ministry of Jesus Christ? Ask Charlene Avery today after church. She has an incredible list of possibilities. Our voices count.

God has made a promise. God's language is poetic. But it's meant to bring equity to all people. It's why Jesus Christ came, lived and taught us how to live.

The history of our lives, our sometimes broken, hurting, unfair, lives we've experienced shows God's presence.

Thirteen times in Isaiah God says, "I." But we end this morning with the beginning: "But now thus says the Lord, who created you and formed you...Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

That is the good news for us to believe and to share with the world in this Epiphany season. As we live as people of expectation and action.

Amen.