

**January 10, 2010**  
**Baptism of Jesus Sunday – Ladner United Church**  
**900 and 1100am**  
**Preacher JIM SHORT**

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## **Isaiah 43**

**43** 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.

<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD your God,  
 the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

I give Egypt as your ransom,  
 Ethiopia\* and Seba in exchange for you.

<sup>4</sup>Because you are precious in my sight,  
 and honoured, and I love you,  
 I give people in return for you,  
 nations in exchange for your life.

<sup>5</sup>Do not fear, for I am with you;  
 I will bring your offspring from the east,  
 and from the west I will gather you;

<sup>6</sup>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—

<sup>7</sup>everyone who is called by my name,  
 whom I created for my glory,  
 whom I formed and made.'

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.'

18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. 19 But Herod the ruler, \* who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, 20 added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

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.'

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(Basis of Union – the United Church of Canada)

## **2.16 Article XVI. Of the Sacraments.**

We acknowledge two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, which were instituted by Christ, to be of perpetual obligation as signs and seals of the covenant ratified in His precious blood, as a means of grace, by which, working in us, He doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and comfort our faith in Him, and as ordinances through the observance of which His Church is to confess her Lord and be visibly distinguished from the rest of the world.

**2 .16.1** Baptism with water into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is the sacrament by which are signified and sealed our union to Christ and participation in the blessings of the new covenant. The proper subjects of baptism are believers and infants presented by their parents or guardians in the Christian faith. In the latter case the parents or guardians should train up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and should expect that their children will, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, receive the benefits which the sacrament is designed and fitted to convey. The Church is under the most solemn obligation to provide for their Christian instruction.

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There are various motivations that bring parents to seek infant baptism for their children...or as adults to seek to be baptized...

- there is a primeval urge – that in response to something so amazing and mysterious as birth – to participate in some ritual of thanksgiving to God – some people who suggest that no matter what we think we believe and don't believe – we are all somewhat hard wired to believe in a supernatural power – all through history and in different religions there are these kind of acknowledgement rituals...
- we also seek a blessings upon our human kind – there are many I would call superstitions about baptism especially for infants – some kind of supernatural protection or power is given, a kind of life insurance, stacking the odds on the good side, unbaptized children will get turned down at the door of heaven if they die – in our heads we can outthink ourselves of them but they have a strong hold over us times
- and tradition – family tradition – and those things are important – families, groups have customs and practices that mean things to them – sometimes thought out, sometimes not - story about the family who had ham at Christmas every year and always had to cut the ham in two – finally someone asked why they did that – everyone said well its tradition – Grandmother always did that – so they asked Grandmother – and she said well – its because I never had a large cooking pan like you do

We take the basis of union – key doctrine

Outward sign of an "inward grace"

- joined to Christ and Christ's church – entry or membership ritual – seals our union with Christ and the new covenant
- quickens, strengths and comforts our faith
- adult believers or children brought by parents one of whom is a believer

All four gospel writers (Gospel meaning Good News – stories of Jesus' life) – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

Baptism finds its roots in the ritual worship described in the book of Leviticus – though many cultures and religions over the centuries have a kind of ritual of purification and new beginning associated with the imagery of water.

To restore an individual to a state of ritual cleanliness so that they might participate in religious services after say, contact with a corpse or after being healed from a kin disease or an illness it was necessary to take a purifying bath.

By Jesus' time, this bathing process ha been replaced with ritual hand washing.

By the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC, if a non Jew converted to baptism, it was necessary for that person to be fully immersed in water in what was called a "proselyte baptism" signifying a kind of death and rising – death to the old religion and old ways and rising cleansed and renewed to their new choice.

Baptismal type rituals had been associated with repentance, forgiveness for wrong, turning to a new way of life for centuries.

John's invitation for people to leave the "city and the temple" – the established religious and political power and come out to be baptized in the wilderness also had associations with the messianic hopes of the Jewish people as well as the opposition of radical Jews to the Roman authority.

Each gospel writers says that at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry (Jesus is about 20) - he is baptized by his weird cousin John who was a part of a religious Jewish fringe group meeting in the desert – opposed to the established religious group of the temple with its corruptions – John – dressed in animal skins, living on insects and honey is baptizing people in the desert – cleansing them and initiating them into a renewed life...(he would be eventually executed by Herod) Jesus went to be baptized by John as other had been...

Those who witnessed Jesus' baptism – said certain things happened...Matthew, Mark and John tell what happened

The heavens opened up as a symbol of the divine human connection between God and humanity in Jesus' life.

God's Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove to signify God's equipping him for his mission as saviour...

A voice boomed out – you are my beloved (my son whom I love) with you I am well pleased...

Luke – who spends much more time describing Jesus' birth, his upbringing, the birth of his cousin John around the same time seems more concerned with what happens to Jesus post baptism – not so much on the ceremony....

I am going to focus for the rest of our time on the world – beloved – what does that mean for us that Jesus was proclaimed by God to be God's beloved son...

You can't escape labels in life...

Somewhere over Christmas a group of us who were parents were describing the process of choosing our children's names – all of us had done so aware of what others might do and do cruelly with the names we choose in terms of nicknames...

Some liked this name or that but because it could be made into this nick name they choose another name...

Labeling...

I have a fascination with what makes us both sell and buy things so I read a book over Christmas called Shoptimism... (Lee Eisenberg)

There's a massive army of people out there trying to figure out who Jim Short is as a buyer and shopper...they collect endless amounts of data – to the point of every time I click my mouse on the internet the data of what I was looking at is used to put me into a category or give me a label...

Always trying to figure out who I am

When it comes to using the internet – am I a maven, lurker, flamer, mole

Am I a classic buyer or a romantic buyer whose motivations are rational methodical or irrational or impulsive

When it comes to advertising – am I an ad evangelist, ad basher, agnostic, ambivalent

Am I a tightwad or a spendthrift?

What bucket I fit in demographically – there are 10 of those each with 60 sub categories

For example in terms of psychographics – survivor, sustainer, Belonger, emulator, achiever, I am me's, experientials, integrateds

That's kind of fun stuff – but labeling has its dangerous and destructive side...

We use labels to define people but also to control people and to keep them in a position and place in relationship to us – sometimes to keep them distance so we do not have to understand nor relate to them...

And usually lump them into categories:

What a wonderful label God gives to Jesus at his baptism even before he's done or achieved anything

Beloved...

You Jesus are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased...

Would that it could be – in this world where so many of us search endlessly for self esteem

Where so many negative and destructive forces seek to assign us value and worth

Where so often the hard knocks of life destroy the very soul of people's lives...

That we would each know that before we are anything else...

We are the "beloved of God"

The water on the head – where abundant is a symbol of God's grace and were in desert communities is it a precious resource again a symbol of God's grace – outward sign of an inward grace

Kennedy was baptized today and she is claimed as God's beloved...

Kennedy...

Before you are anything else

Before we know very much about you

Before you have done, achieved, struggled, lived, gone to school, had friends

got a job, raised a family, lived where ever...we don't know whether you'll be a Christian, be a part of a church – join another faith – choose to be agnostic, atheistic – we basically know nothing of what you future will be...but we do now that now and for ever you -

You are beloved...

My son Nick taught me something about what this sense of beloved means...

Some of you know that on my last day here in Delta before leaving for Afghanistan – he asked me for my signature on a piece of paper and came home with it tattooed on his arm

A few months back – he had Cathy's signature tattooed on his leg

People have been both touched by that and also thought it to be weird

but you know – we won't always be physically close to him – he works temporarily in Calgary – hopefully he'll outlive us – we don't always know what he's up to (thank God) – he's had an in and out relationship with the church – we had him baptized – he was raised in the church – he himself choose to join the church formally as a young adult – he's not apart of a church right now but has a very thoughtful and spiritual outlook on life and relationships – who knows what the future holds...

but whatever – I like the idea that he can look at his arm and leg and remember he's our child – that we love him...unconditionally

I like the idea that as he is working his way through life, making his choices and working his way through relationships that he might look at my signature or Cathy's and remember what we have taught him...

And I also like knowing that if he ever finds himself feeling unloved or hopeless – does not know where to turn or is facing a choice with disastrous consequences – that he might see one of those signatures and remember no matter how bad, it is – he always has a home with us and he is beloved...

That's what baptism is...

First and foremost...you are beloved...

That when the water is poured on us...mark upon us that we are God's beloved...

Martin Luther – the great 16<sup>th</sup> Century reformer admonished people to remember their baptism...

It was not to remember the ceremony, or the party or the gifts...

but rather to remember that by God's grace through faith – that day you were informed who you are – beloved and whose you ultimately are – God's

John Leith (quoted in Feasting on the Word – Year C, Vol 1 p. 240)

"In baptism the child's name is called because our faith is that God thought of this child before the child was that God gave this child an identity, individuality, a name, and a dignity that no one should dare abuse. Human existence has its origin not in the accidents of history and biology, but in the will and the intention of God, the creator of heaven and earth"

And by faith...

Those who are baptized into Jesus' church – will look at not only themselves

But each other as God's beloved

And that the labels we give to each other – will be one's that create a just and equitable world and community...

Because it's not true – sticks and stones may break bones but words hurt also...

We'll never see the world of justice and peace that God desires and inaugurated in Jesus' life

As long as our neighbors, our brothers and sisters remain

Think for a moment about those horrific names and labels we often give to people of other religions and ethnicities

Or the hurtful words that have been used to describe people gay or lesbian sexual orientation...

How easily we label other people terrorists, enemies, fanatics or refer to people – people who are beloved of God by their labels...

The poor, drug users, underprivileged,

The enemy, the bad guy, the criminal,

Upper class, lower class, middle class,

Beautiful, ugly

Good, bad, righteous, unrighteous,

Whatever label you choose to sort the relationships of the world...and depersonalize the other...

(Marjorie Suchocki quoted in Feasting on the Word Vol. 1 Year C page 238)

After sitting on a jury to find someone guilty of a crime, she began to contemplate her place as part of the larger interrelated system.

"The sorry world of the crack house...had seemed so distant from my world as the academic dean of a theological seminary. But in truth, that "other world" was only a few miles from my home. Where did that world start, and where did it end? "My" world was geographically close but had I ever intentionally done anything to touch the lives in that "other" world? Was I only involved to judge its inhabitants? Or was there not a sense in which I was a participant in that world as well as mine, even if that participation were as an absentee neighbour? "

Happens in homes, in schoolyards, streets, communities, countries, whatever...

If God so loved the world (cosmos) – John 3:16 that he gave God's only son...

then we'll have to stop this habit putting labels on the other people of the world so that we might all enter God's kingdom as brothers and sisters....(Paul J Nuechterlein Emmaus Lutheran Racine WI)

An old rabbi was talking with his assembly. He asked his people "how do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?" After a moment, someone ventured, "Is it that moment when the individual trees begin to step out into the forest/" The old rabbi shook his head. "No, it is not that moment". Another one spoke up "Is it that moment when we can begin to tell a cloud from the morning mist?" "No" said the Rabbi "No, it is not that moment" They all fell deeply silent. Finally someone said "Please tell us, rabbi, how we can know that moment when the night has ended and the day has begun." And then the old rabbi said "It is that moment when you can look into the face of a stranger, and see them as your brother or sister. Until then, the night is still with us."

