

# I AM WITH YOU

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January 13, 2019

Epiphany 1

[Isaiah 43:1-2,5-6](#)

[Luke 3:15-17,21-22](#)

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(prayer)

As Jim Strathdee's hymn says: *The Work of Christmas is begun*. In our bibles, when the kings and the shepherds have found their way home, the narrative of Jesus jumps ahead thirty years.

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On this first Sunday after Epiphany, the [Revised Common Lectionary](#) invites us (in each year of the three year rotation) to hear one of the gospel versions of Jesus' baptism.

- Year A: Matthew
- Year B: Mark
- Year C: Luke

[we are in year c right now, so today we read Luke.]

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A keen eye might have noticed that I skipped over verses 18, 19 and 20. There is a method to that madness.

Verses 19 and 20 briefly mention that one of the things John the Baptist talked about was (what he saw as) immoral and evil acts done by King [Herod Antipas](#) of Galilee. Luke interrupts the Jesus baptism narrative to foreshadow that these political sermons would eventually get John arrested.

I can easily see why the RCL ignores those verses for today: they seem an unnecessarily disruption of the baptism story. But, I would've been okay if verse 18 has been included. It is a nice summary statement of the first half of the reading: *With many other exhortations, [John] proclaimed the good news to the people.*

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One of the things that the first part of the Luke passages tells us is that people came to John because *what he had to say* added to their lives. He preached that God's patience and forgiveness is refreshing and good; that even the worst parts of us could be turned around and set back on course. This message was so inspiring that some people even speculated that John might be the long-awaited messiah.

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Today's reading includes a statement that (as good as people think John is), there is *one to come* who is even greater. This message was so well known in the early decades of the Christian movement that it is recorded in all four gospels (a rare occurrence).

Mark 1:7 And [John] preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, **the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.** <sup>s</sup> I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the **Holy Ghost.**

Matt 3:11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, **whose shoes I am not worthy [9] to bear:** he shall baptize you with the **Holy Ghost, and with fire:**

Luke 3:16 John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, **the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose:** he shall baptize you with the **Holy Ghost and with fire:**

John 1:26 John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; <sup>27</sup> He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, **whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.**

*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.*

Matthew, Mark and Luke quote the Baptist saying that this *one to come* will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Matthew and Luke added “this one will (also) baptize with fire” and the first and third gospels are the only ones to share the little parable about a farmer separating the (desired) seeds from (disposable) grain stalks.

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Gospel #4 (John - not the Baptist, but the disciple) doesn't actually describe Jesus being baptized (as the other three do), but all four books describe Jesus being enveloped by God's spirit while in John the Baptist's company. They all use the image of a descending dove to convey this message.

It may be steeped in imagery and metaphor but the lesson is... that God is with Jesus as he embarks on a new ministry.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke emphasis this point by recording that a heavenly voice proclaimed that God is pleased with Jesus as a holy, beloved son.

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None of the gospel writers tell us *why* Jesus (in late-middle age) decided to leave his Nazareth carpentry shop to hang out with John the Baptist in Judean wilderness. Luke's gospel claims a family connection between the two before either was born, but it is never mentioned in relation to their adult lives.

“Something” drew Jesus out of the comfort of the only life he had ever known. Did he go looking for John, or did he stumble upon him? We can only speculate.

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What the Bible does tell us is:

- that (for some reason) Jesus found himself among a crowd of John's followers by the Jordan River valley east of Jerusalem;
- that Jesus - like others in that crowd - responded to John's call to come *in and out* of the water so that he might die to an old way of life and rise to a fresh, renewed, loved and free life;
- that Jesus felt (figuratively for sure and possibly literally) that God's spirit was his close companion;
- that (if we read beyond today's passage) Jesus took significant time alone to wrestle with *how* he might live out this renewed understanding of his existence;

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- that - after John's arrest - Jesus would return to Galilee inspired to preach (as John had in Judea) that *The Realm of God has come near!*
- that one of Jesus' first sermons (in his hometown synagogue) would be to proclaim that *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. The Lord has anointed me:*
  - *to bring good news to the poor;*
  - *to proclaim release to the captives;*
  - *to recover sight to the blind;*
  - *to let the oppressed go free;*
  - *to proclaim the jubilee of the Lord.*

[more on *this* Isaiah-based sermon of Jesus in a couple of weeks]

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Jesus did all of this... confident that he was not alone: that God was with him.

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The book of [Isaiah](#) can be divided into two distinct sections coming from three distinct time periods within the history of the Hebrew people.

Chapters 1-39 contain the teachings of a late 8th century (BCE) Judean prophet called Isaiah Ben Amoz. It was a time of the expanding Assyrian Empire. During Isaiah's time, the Assyrians overran the lands of Aram and even the northern Hebrew kingdom of Israel. By the end of the 700s, Judah may have retained some autonomy, but they were subject to the *global* power and influence of Assyria.

The second half of the book (chapters 40-66) were added about 150 years later, by an anonymous editor(s) living in the time of new Empires. By this time, Assyrian influence had waned and Babylon had expanded west. In 586BCE Nebuchadnezzar's armies seized control of Jerusalem and sent many of the Judean people to live in exile by the rivers of Babylon (where a psalmist wrote that they sat and wept and remembered Zion). The Babylonian Exile that lasted about 70 years until Cyrus of Persia (who had conquered Babylon in 539) allowed the Judeans to return home sometime before 515.

This second half of Isaiah can be viewed in two parts, itself.

- Isaiah 40-54 speaks to the experience of the exile;
- Isaiah 55-66 speaks to the experience of the return.

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So, today's chapter-43-reading is from the middle part of Isaiah - the time of the babylonian exile. *That fact* gives us context to the promise made in those words.

*Thus says the Lord,  
(who created and formed you):  
I call you by name, you are mine.  
Do not fear, for I am with you;*

*I will bring your my sons and daughters from far away - from the end of the earth.*

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Imagine how a people in exile might hear those words. *Do not fear, for I am with you; you are mine.*

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You may feel cut off, but you are not abandoned. I am *still* your God and you are *still* my people.

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There is a wonderful section in the book of Ezekiel that also comes from this time.

Ezekiel was a temple priest who was taken with other exiles into Babylon. Ezekiel had a vision where he saw:

*The glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house. (Ez10:18)*

*Thus says the Lord God: "Though the people are removed far away among the nations, and scattered among the countries, I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone." (Ez11:16)*

Prior to the exile, from the time it was built, the Temple had been a fixture on the Jerusalem skyline for hundreds of years.

Over those centuries of stability, a theology developed that the Spirit of God literally resided within the temple... this is One of the reasons why it is called a house of god.

Imagine the crisis of faith thrust in to the exiles when they heard the reports that (as a result of the babylonian invasion) the Temple had been looted and torn down: the dwelling place of god was laid in ruins. Obviously, Yahweh-god had been of Judah had been defeated by the greater gods of Babylon. But, Ezekiel's visions inspired a new belief: that the spirit of the people's god was mobile - that God is where God's people are. Even without a physical sanctuary, the refugee camps of Babylon could be seen as holy ground.

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*Do not fear, for I am with you.*

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This old promise was made real again for Jesus as he rose up out of the Jordan River water. *You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased.*

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Luke tells us that John the Baptist said that he baptized with **water**, but there was more to come: a baptism of **spirit** and **fire**. The former was a literal experience, the later two... more figurative.

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Water Baptism is an outward symbol of an internal reality.

I doubt that even John would have believed that something magical happened while a person went under the water. John called people to turn back to God and re-focus their lives.

This change would have happened *within* a person, when they committed their heart and mind to this promise.

They symbolised their hope (and outwardly professed their willingness to embrace this promise) by participating in John's ceremony and ritual.

Even John knew that if nothing in a person's life changed after they dried off, the baptism remained only a nice moment in time... a ritual without meaning.

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When I listen to John's promise of a baptism of water, spirit, and fire, I hear about a deeper commitment.

But being open to the influence of the Spirit includes a willingness to be guided by the presence of god as we move forward in life. To trust in a mystery beyond ourselves.

Fire, in today's passage, is a symbol of making choices of what is important in life. John the

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Baptist's parable (of the wheat and the chaff) described being able to separate that which is valuable and life-giving from that which can be set aside.

I hear *baptism by fire* as embracing a passion for all that is valuable and just and good.

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I hear the totality of the baptism of Jesus narrative in Luke (water, spirit, and fire) as an invitation to not stop with the wonder and mystery of the ritual, but to live into the promise of renewed life, by making the life to come new and improved!

Safe in the knowledge that God is with us, we can live out our calling. The UCCan Creed summarizes this calling as:

- celebrating God's presence,
- living with respect in Creation,
- loving and serving others,
- seeking justice and resisting evil,
- proclaiming Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.

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And so, perhaps that can be a message for us on this *Baptism of Jesus* Sunday - the first Sunday after Epiphany: that we are more than our rituals.

Within the two millennia practice of the Christian church, Baptism has been our *rite of initiation* - our ceremony of welcome and inclusion. I often say on Sundays that we celebrate baptisms in this church that we are celebrating an *already existing* relationship with God - even more than our saying yes to God, we are appreciating that God has already said yes to us.

Our commitment does not culminate in a ceremony of symbolic washing. Commitment is nurtured and grown in our baptisms in spirit and fire - our faith is best expressed in our ability to let the Light of God shine through us - to be *on fire* (passionate) for the ministry of Jesus.

Our faith is further made possible when we trust in the mystery and promise that we are not alone... that God is ever with us!

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Let us pray:

Spirit of God, open us up to possibilities that exist for us because of your promise to always be with us. Amen.

#161MV "I Have Called You By Your Name"