

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, January 9, 2022)**

NOTE: Pastor Donald and our Liturgist Elsie did our readings antiphonally this Sunday as indicated below.

Texts: **Isaiah 43:1-2 5-7, and Luke 3:15-17, 21-22** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Elsie: As we begin the season after the Epiphany, we rejoice that God's word continues to hold promise and power in our lives, calling each of us by name through living waters.

Pastor: **In our readings for today, we are reminded to listen for God in words of hope and encouragement.**

Elsie: First, from the book of Isaiah:

Pastor: But now, Leah and Rachel and Jacob, hear the word of Yahweh—the One who created you, the One who fashioned you, Israel:

Elsie: Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.

Pastor: When you pass through the seas, I will be with you; when you pass over the rivers, you will not drown. Walk through fire, and you will not be singed; walk through flames and you will not be burned.

Elsie: Have no fear for I am with you; I will bring your descendants from the east and gather them from the west.

Pastor: To the north I will say, "Give them up!" and to the south, "Do not hold them back! Bring my daughters and sons from afar, return them from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by my Name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made!"

Elsie: And from the Gospel according to Luke,

Pastor: The people were full of anticipation, wondering in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah. John answered them all by saying,

Elsie: "I am baptizing you in water, but someone is coming who is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not fit to untie! This One will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire.

Pastor: A winnowing fan is in his hand to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary, but the chaff will be burnt in unquenchable fire."

Elsie: When all the people were baptized, Jesus also came to be baptized.

Pastor: **And while Jesus was praying, the skies opened and the Holy Spirit descended on the Anointed One in visible form, like a dove. A voice from heaven said,**

Elsie: “You are my Own, my Beloved. On you my favor rests.”

Pastor: **The voice of God, which spoke from the clouds at Jesus’ baptism, still speaks in lives today.**

Elsie: It speaks a word of love and promise to all who are baptized, offering identity and belonging. Amen.

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk: *“Through the Waters”*

When I saw what the available texts were from the lectionary for today, it was pretty much a no-brainer as to which I’d choose as the passage from Isaiah is definitely, with a wink to Pat, my all-time favorite and the gospel story from Luke reaffirms for me something I think is of such vital importance to each of us as human beings.

Living in this pandemic time, beset by so many challenges and disappointments – I’m sure you have many of your own as I do mine – just reading the words of Isaiah 43 again and again throughout the week as well as with Elsie today – has lifted my spirits and reminded me again of how crucial it is to return to the scriptures and God’s promises no matter what we’re going through in life, but especially when walking through the fires, swimming through the swirling seas or rowing across the rough rivers of our lives.

“Have no fear for I am with you” God exhorts and promises to us again and again throughout the scriptures. No matter whether the virus is within your body or at your door, I am with you. No matter whether the government crumbles and falls, I am with you, no matter if death itself overtakes you – your own or somebody close to you – I am with you and holding you in my hand.

This is no empty promise, mind you. And this is no proclamation made to just anyone, either. It’s made to YOU. It’s made to each one of us. Just as the prophet calls the individual children of Israel by name – Leah and Rachel and Jacob – so God calls each of us by name to reassure us that we are redeemed and we are God’s own.

Can we claim that? Can you claim that? Can I claim that? Can we actually see ourselves as one of God’s beloved children? Called by name and held in God’s hand? Can you say to yourself out loud, I am who I am. I am God’s own and I am beloved by God? Try it. Say it out loud with your name inserted. I am Donald and I am loved by God. Say it again. And again.

Isn’t that something? What power that gives us. What love that gives us.

It’s always there for us, you know. The love of God is like the everlasting water that Jesus is immersed in and that same water we acknowledge whenever a baptism takes place. It’s eternal water that cleanses us from the thought that we are less than or somehow

condemned by our sin or simply by being human. Rising out of the water, we too claim our place as God's beloved child and I can assure you that God is well pleased.

I really believe that so many of the ills within ourselves and within our world are caused by the feelings we have and the beliefs we harbor, perhaps secretly, that we are somehow damaged and not worthy to stand beside Jesus in the water. And this feeling of unworthiness and the abject fear that we are not enough and that God is somehow punishing us for our faults threatens to drown us instead of bathing us in the waters of redemption and healing and care that are always available to us through the all-encompassing love God has for us.

The always thoughtful and loving Dr. David Lose encourages us to notice God's words to Jesus during His baptism. "They are personal, poignant, and powerful," he writes. ["You are my Own, my Beloved. On you my favor rests.']. "Wrapped in these words of acceptance are the blessings of identity, worth, and unwavering regard."

He goes on to point out that "Jesus' baptism isn't preamble to all that comes later in his life, it's the highpoint and climax of the story in a nutshell. Again and again, as Jesus casts out unclean spirits, heals the sick, feeds the hungry, and welcomes the outcast, he will only do to others what has already been done to him, telling them via word and deed that they, too, are beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased...Baptism is so incredibly important, because it offers us the acceptance, not merely affirmation of the Creator of the cosmos and thereby empowers US to accept others in turn. Baptism reminds us that wherever we may go and whatever we may do or have done to us, yet God continues to love us, accept us, and hold onto us."

And that is precisely why every year we celebrate the Baptism of Christ on a day like today. That is to remember that the symbol of baptism and the water that covers us all is the same symbol that God used to celebrate the Christ and to show God's love for humanity and the One he sent to represent all of us. These are the same waters that we pass through in Isaiah, held aloft and beloved by God even when they threaten to overwhelm us instead of bless us.

"In Baptism," Dr. Lose writes in yet another excellent article, "God proclaims God's great love for us; calls, names, and claims us as God's beloved children; gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit;...and then, because of God's love for us, God also promises to forgive, renew, and restore us at all times."

When you walk through a storm hold your head up high and don't be afraid of the dark...walk on through the wind, walk on through the rain... walk on, walk on with hope in your heart and you'll never walk alone. You'll never walk alone."

I want to leave you today with this poem created for this Baptism of Christ Sunday by the beautiful poet Maren Tirabassi.

Every time we turn on the faucet
or off the teakettle,

every time we fill a washing machine
or empty the bathtub,
every time we boil a potato
or shampoo the hair of someone
who can't raise their arms,
every time we irrigate crops or eyes,
every time we diaper a baby
shed a tear with a friend,
or offer a stranger something to drink,
every time we listen to raindrops fall,
watch snow melt
or just complain about the drip
from a pipe we can't afford to repair,
every time, every time,
we remember we are baptized.
Maybe it happened in a church
or a lake or a river,
long ago or yesterday.
Maybe we are still swimming toward it,
or it never happened and never will.
God doesn't mind.
Theologically speaking,
the faucet or the stranger,
either one,
would be enough.

Amen.