

*It's One Baptism, and We Live It Everyday*  
Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

*What the Text tell us...*

1. John the Baptizer's baptism was a baptism of repentance of the old life, and a call to live a new life. It was a ritual of the prophets in the covenant of the Old Testament, and it was a re-dedication of life to the covenant of faithfulness.
2. Jesus did not need the John's baptism from sin. Jesus is baptized to a calling, to a new direction to living out his faithfulness.
3. Every account of the baptism puts a spotlight on two elements: the dove and the voice! Both of them are evidence of the presence and power, the grace and affirmation of the Holy Spirit of God.

*Where we are in baptism today...*

1. Different parts of the church - from different histories - see baptism different ways.
2. Many spotlight John's baptism of repentance: A person's adult choice to turn from an old life of sin and to a new life of following Christ. It's perfectly valid, but it causes problems. When does a person know enough to make the choice? What is the "Age of accountability"? - 5? 7? 14? 45? When do any of us really understand what we are doing - even at the basic level - when we say "yes" to Christ?
3. Many, like us Presbyterians, focus on the "naming" of a new life with a "Christian name," and on God's calling to live as a follower. Our way is perfectly valid, and maybe even more correct. [Of course, we would think that.] But it causes problems, too: baptism becomes a kind of initiation ritual into the club called the church. We want them to become "members" on the roll. It's an "in or out thing" that somehow assures us. We forget the promises that are made by the person, by the parents, and by the congregation about what happens after baptism. Baptism is not being on the roll. It's living the life together.
4. There is a common problem in both the views: we are motivated to baptism out of fear for what might happen to those who are not baptized. Let's say it out loud: we are afraid that people will go to hell if they aren't baptized, or don't make a choice for Jesus, or aren't on the church roll somewhere.

We are still in John's baptism, and in the back of our minds we hear that sermon: "you generation of snakes, flee from the wrath to come."

Jesus doesn't say words like this, and Jesus didn't get baptized to flee from anything. Jesus didn't see God as a vengeful, wrathful God. We even have the remembered quote that "God did not come into the world to judge the world, but to save it."

Let's look again at the text, and see if we can learn a better option for understanding what is going on in Baptism.

It's a dove and voice thing! That was the difference that made them remember this event! It was the one element that had never happened before in a baptism, and it changes the meaning of baptism for us because of what it meant for Jesus.

"You belong to me. I am pleased with you."

We belong to God - not because of anything we have done, or any choice we have made, or any power we exercise, or any good we do. We belong to God, because God gives us life, breathes life into us, puts spirit into us. That is why we become "living souls." God "claims us," says we belong, and that's why we do.

So, baptism does not have much of anything to do with "understanding" or choosing or anything we do. Baptizing with dove and voice is something God does because of who God is and who we are.

Like it or not, admit it or not, run from it or not, be good son or prodigal - from the time we are born to the time after we die, we belong to God. The life we have is not of our making and not of our own doing. The deep and real and very human life we live beyond the heart beating and the muscle moving - the real who-we-are in the heart and in the actions is all God's doing!

Baptism is the celebration and sealing of the simple fact that we cannot take life into our own hands. Better than that, we are in God's hands.

Baptism tells us what Jesus tells us: God is not a snake-killer, a judge and punisher. God is a parent, whose loves all the children no matter what. We are in God's loving hands.

As the old baptismal words in Reformed history say, "Little children do not understand these things, but God's grace never depends on our understanding, and it always more than our deserving. So, as we live, we live to the Lord, and when we die, we die to the Lord. Because whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."

From the dove and the voice, we learn that baptism is about LIFE and about living the life. Baptism is about hearing the Good News that we belong to God. We are "not our own. We have been bought with a price." The God who loves us and made us, has redeemed us and called us."

Baptism is about the life that God gives us, and living that life to please God. Baptism is the presence and power of God's grace that helps us to live true to who we really are, instead of trying to be who others say we are, or trying to invent ourselves by becoming who we aren't.

Let me explain using the analogy that this Baptism event uses: the parent image.

For the most part, lots of us grow up with people who are trying to play parent (and that can be parents or grandparents or teachers or even Sunday School teachers), who are telling us who we ought to be. That's not so bad, except when parent people are telling us who they have

decided we ought to be, and we better be their idea. And no matter what we do, we better be trying to be who they want us to be. Their message is “You belong to me, and you better be who I say you will be. And if you aren’t, then you’ll never be good enough for me.”

God the parent would *never* say anything like that. One of the reasons we have to be careful about calling God a “father” or a “parent” is that a lot of children of God have been children of parents and proxy-parents who haven’t talked like God. Our tasks as parents is to be the kind of parent like God is a kind of parent.

There is another message that children of all ages seem to get from people who try to play parent in different ways. A lot of times we parents say, “you can be anything you want to be.” To be honest, this is really better than imposing impossible obligation or unfulfilled dreams or selfish expectations on children’s futures. But none of us can be anything we want to be. We have to find those directions that suit our gifts, and we have to increase the skills we have been given. It’s not parenting if we tell children they can do the impossible. We need to help them be the best they can be with what God has given them. Instead of leaving children to wander in every direction which is no direction, our calling as a parent is to point them to their calling in God’s direction.

So instead of telling our children they ought to be what we want them to be, or they can be anything, maybe we could tell them something like God told Jesus - like a father could tell a son, a mother could tell a daughter...

“God has made you unique and different, and has given you gifts and skills. You can discover who God made you to be, and grow those gifts and hone those skills to move in the direction of your life that God points you. The only life you have is the one God gives you, so live that life, and always remember: You belong to God, and God is always pleased with what you try to do to please God.”

From earliest Sunday School class to every adult Bible Study in Presbyterian church, the lesson is Whose we are, and who we are to be and do that pleases Christ.

Or as the Old question in the Westminster Catechism asks: “What is the chief end - the ultimate purpose - of humanity? ...to glorify (to honor, to make known, to point to) God, and enjoy God forever!”

In some denominations and traditions, baptism is a ceremony that marks our choices to accept God’s love and turn away from sin and turn toward God and follow Christ’s example. That is all to the good.

In Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, Baptism is not about what we do or what we understand. It is about celebrating the grace that what God has done in Jesus Christ, God will do for us, because God is always at work to make us who God wants us to be. That is why all of us make vows at baptisms to grow each other in grace, to be spiritual parents to children that God has entrusted to us, to live the life of our baptism in God’s good pleasure, and to help each other be pointed in God’s direction.

We Presbyterians have always believed in education in all kinds of knowledge, but especially in that baptismal education of “nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.” That task is not the job of the minister, and not the job of the Session, or even the job of the Christian Education committee.

It is everyone’s job, because it is not so much about “educating” the facts as it is nurturing the life. We are called to model commitment, to be examples of devotion, to live out our multiple callings in the church and in the world, and to fulfill our own baptismal vows and to help God’s children - especially the younger ones - know the joy of what it means to know that God is always with us, and always for us. And we are assured that God is pleased when we see the dove of God’s never-leaving presence and listen the voice of God’s never-failing assurance.

Then we are called - in all our different gifts and skills and all our varied callings - to go and tell everyone about Christ, baptizing them into his life because they belong to God in their living, teaching them all that Christ commands and helping them follow Christ’s example. We are called to live our own baptismal vows every day, and to help all of God’s children sing the song of joy because we live in dove and voice grace, and we hear what God says to all of us every day...

“You belong to me, and I am pleased with you.”

.....

Who we are is the gift of God’s grace and the calling of God’s purpose. We learn that in the dove and voice of our own baptism, and in that moment of God’s grace we begin to live every day the calling we hear in the direction God points.

So let us celebrate God’s calling and our belonging to God by renewing the vows of baptism that brought us to live the life that God has given to us...

#### Reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows

Minister: Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

**People: I do.**

Minister: Who is your Lord and Savior?

**People: Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.**

Minister: Do you trust him with your life?

**People: I do, with God’s help.**

Minister: Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

**People: I will, with God’s help.**

Minister: Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a follower of Jesus Christ?

**People: I will, with God’s help.**