

Displaying God's Glory
Isaiah 61 Luke 3
January 10, 2010
Pastor Lin Grace Rohr

As risky as it may be...I invite you to close your eyes for a minute and imagine if you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be? An ever-green standing hopeful in the middle of a long cold winter day? A deciduous aflame with colors of red, orange and yellow on a crisp fall day or standing stark and bare waiting for the first warmth of spring to begin to awaken your dormant state? Or a lone cypress clinging to the edge of the cliff like the one in Monterey, CA? Or a shade tree in the middle of a field or a sapling on the forest floor, or a redwood towering to the sky...or a weeping willow blowing in the wind? What kind of tree would you be? Open your eyes...anyone want to share?

Granted this is an unusual beginning to a sermon but our Isaiah text invites the question. The text we read this morning were words of hope and encouragement to the Israelites during the Babylonian Exile. The word of hope is familiar to us and we'll get back to that in a minute. The word of encouragement that follows it was that they shall receive the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit...these words of encouragement are then followed with the vision of the people coming through those hard times ...as **oaks** of righteousness...displaying the glory of God! This is a word of encouragement for us as well; you may not see yourself as an oak but let's look at the word of hope and see the strength that is offered to us.

The first verses of Isaiah 61 are those words of hope, and they are familiar to us as they were claimed by Jesus after his baptism. Jesus in the synagogue read these verses saying that they were fulfilled in him. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." This powerful claim of purpose and action is often seen as the beginning of Jesus' ministry; however, Jesus' ministry did not begin there...rather in an often overlooked way...it began with his baptism.

Jesus' baptism is often overlooked because let's face it; our own baptisms seem to have little relevance for us, let alone Jesus'. When we think of baptism today we think of cute little babies, up in front of the church with clean water being gingerly sprinkled on their heads not a scruffy thirty year old man being dipped in a muddy river. Although it is one of our Sacraments, confusion surrounds baptism. And many are confused why Jesus needed to be baptized. Why he couldn't just get going with his business of bringing good news to the poor, and releasing the captives and making the blind see. One contemporary preacher/theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor, summarizes it well, "the One who was without sin was baptized in the River Jordan to avoid the sin of standing apart from us." As we heard last week in Scott Anderson's sermon on John 1, when the Word became flesh, Jesus became one with us so that we might be one with God. Jesus the One who was fully divine embraced humanity by becoming one of us...in his baptism Jesus, fully God, humbled himself, submitted himself to a cleansing ritual that later he commanded others to do "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" in

order that we might see that no matter how good we think we are...we are to humble ourselves before God and follow Jesus' example as we seek to live the baptized life

So what is the baptized life? For many baptism is something we don't even remember, let alone allow it us shape our lives. John Calvin had four main points on the baptized life. Let me summarize them. One, the baptized life is a life of forgiveness: God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others. In baptism, Calvin says, "our sins are so abolished, remitted, and effaced that they never come into God's sight, they are never recalled, they are never held against us." Do we really believe God treats us this way, sometimes yes, sometimes no? And if God treats us this way...are we not to treat others this way? The answer, of course, is yes, but we are all too human and we hold onto hurts and grab onto grudges. The way of forgiveness is a key component in living the baptized life, but we struggle with it! Sure we pray for it weekly in the Lord's Prayer, forgive us as we forgive...but we still struggle. Next month, Mary Ircink and I will begin an eight week course on Thursday mornings exploring deeper how we live the way of forgiveness. Unfortunately, it's not something we can learn once and check it off our "to do" list. It's an ongoing part of the transforming process of living the baptized life!

The second point Calvin makes is that living the baptized life is participating in Christ's death and resurrection. It's a process of regeneration as we go through life, and face the challenges that make us struggle and events that make us weep...we hold to the hope that Christ, the word that became flesh, is with us. In life and in death and in life again...Christ is with us! Emmanuel. "Baptism" Calvin said, "is a sign that we enter into life in Christ, only through death, that there is a gulf between the realm of nature and the realm of grace, that what is new in Christ is indeed a new creation, and not simply a reshaping and improving of the old."

Calvin's third point in living the baptized life is we share in Christ's blessings, "we put on Christ, receiving a new identity." Unfortunately, many of us continue to try to reshape and improve the old rather than live into our baptismal identities as sons and daughters of God.

The last main point Calvin makes is the one we are most familiar. That being, in baptism we are made apart of the new covenant and adopted into the body of Christ, received into the Church. The church that Paul in Ephesians says, "Christ loved and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water [do you hear baptism] by the word. So as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that the church may be holy."

We may not feel holy. We may not think the people in the pew next to us are holy. We may be anxious to get out and get on with the business of bringing good news to the poor and proclaiming release to the captives but if Jesus first humbled himself...to begin his ministry with baptism shouldn't we follow his lead...even if our baptisms were decades ago...there is hope. Luke's account of Jesus' baptism gives us an additional insight not found in any other of the gospels. In both Matthew and Mark, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus after he came up out of the water. In John, John affirms that it happened that way. However, in Luke, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus later, when he was praying. What a tremendous message of hope for us! Now...is our later...our baptisms may have been years ago and we know we received the gift of the Holy Spirit then but as we begin this New Year...let us begin with prayer...seeking and

anticipating the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift for our baptized lives: the gift that makes a difference! The gift that will enable us to heed the call to ministry and mission, to live the grace filled life, the baptized life, of love and service!

When you answered my question at the beginning of the service, “what kind of tree would you be?” I bet none of you thought, “oh, I’d be an artificial tree...decorated with beautiful lights of an ordinary life and ornate ornaments of oration.” No, we want more...and we are offered more...we are offered an abundant life in Jesus Christ! Not necessarily abundant in external things but with things like “the oil of gladness instead of mourning and the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.” How can we be “the oaks of righteousness displaying the glory of God” in our faith and as a community of faith if we are not nurtured in the waters of baptism? We can’t! Real trees, live trees, cannot grow strong and healthy if they are not watered! The New Testament ends with a vision, the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God and the invitation for everyone who is thirsty to come. [Revelation 22:1-2, 17]. Let us come and together pray and proclaim this year 2010 to be a year of the Lord’s favor! Let us pray...