

Baptism of the Lord A  
Isaiah 42:1-9  
Matthew 3:13-17  
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Sermon preached by Laura Merrill  
Wimberley UMC  
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Anytime we celebrate a sacrament, as we're going to do today, whether baptism or Holy Communion, there are several things that have to happen to make it happen. We have to have a physical element, like bread or wine or water, and we have to call down the Holy Spirit upon those elements. We ask God to use these physical, tangible means to give to us a grace that we cannot see, to be present with us, to show us something, to make us different. I'm not sure we always know that's what we're doing in the sacraments. The church hasn't always done a very good job of teaching our people what it all means, and sometimes we've celebrated them in an incredibly boring way. Writer Annie Dillard talks about this gap in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*.

She writes:

"Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

Dillard points at a fact we often forget—when God sends the Spirit upon us, it is never for the purpose of leaving us as we are. The purpose of the Spirit is always transformation. It may come to heal us, comfort us, energize or baptize us, but the Spirit always comes to change us. We may need helmets for this experience, or we

may not. But I'd like to talk briefly about the kinds of transformation we can see in the scriptures today, as linked to baptism.

First, it's clear that the Spirit we receive in baptism comes to transform us personally, individually. In Jesus' baptism, the Spirit came to rest upon Jesus like a dove, and a voice from heaven called him Beloved. We can't know exactly what this meant to him, how Jesus felt in that moment. But we do see that immediately following this event in the Jordan River, the same Spirit that was so sweet to him then drove Jesus out into the wilderness to fast and be tempted for 40 days. Jesus went to battle the demon, and he went armed with a potent defense: his identity, the name God had given to him in the water—my Son, my Beloved, in whom I find delight. Jesus was rooted in that name, and it kept him clear as to his purpose and his allegiance. And these events in the river and the desert got him ready for what was next, which was the beginning of his public ministry.

We're baptizing two people today, one an adult and one a child. Both of them will be baptized by water and by the Spirit. Both of them will receive the name Beloved Child, the mark of God upon them, whether on the bottom of their feet or the top of their heads. And that mark, that name, is the grounding of all they will do as Christian people. The Holy Spirit of God, which we will brazenly call down upon the water and upon them, will work to transform them throughout their lives, so that they can be ministers in the footsteps of Christ.

The same Spirit that names and claims us in baptism also points us toward the future and out toward the world. Some have called baptism a Christian's "marching

orders.” And that’s because the Spirit seeks to transform not only us, but also the world. God’s not going to leave the world as it is. This is the promise and the desire intertwined in the whole of the scriptures, a vision of what the world can and one day will be, by the grace of God and the action of the Holy Spirit. We can see the vision painted vividly in the Old Testament reading, in what is known as a Servant Song of Isaiah.

Often in the Old Testament we find passages that describe the ideal king God is going to send the people. This one starts out that way—the servant is chosen by God and bears God’s spirit; “he will bring forth justice to the nations.” Normal enough—we can imagine such a king in our heads, sitting comfortably on his throne, in velvet robes, with an expression of wisdom and serenity, a handsome face, muscular body, regal bearing, an open smile—a king both strong and benevolent. This image of power, ordained by God, is easy for us to conjure up in our minds.

But in verse 2 comes an enormous shift, one that doesn’t fit the picture we’ve imagined. Here, Isaiah says, the servant of God will not rule or execute justice by force. He will not speak with a loud voice, commanding attention. Indeed, his voice will not be heard at all. And in beautiful imagery, the text says, “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench (42:3). I thought about these lines, and how common it might be for us to see a half broken stalk and just to reach out and break it the rest of the way as we walk by—or to blow out a candle that’s sputtering, or to step on a bug on the sidewalk. There’s something about weakness

that inspires us to a show of power and domination. Heaven knows our world is based on that principle.

So God is choosing this very unexpected way of transforming that reality, establishing justice quietly and uprooting oppression through gentleness. And some have said that mid-way into the passage, it starts looking like maybe instead of the servant's being a person, it's actually the whole people of Israel. And God is going to use the servant as a tool to open the eyes of the blind and set the prisoners free. The servant of God, the people of God, will be a light to the nations, Isaiah says. And the place is not going to look like it does now. "See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them."

The Holy Spirit of God comes to mix things up and change things around. In our lives, the Spirit comes to bring us healing and hope and wisdom. It uncovers the truth in our hearts and seeks to reconcile our relationships. And in the context of baptism, the Spirit of God claims us and writes the Divine Name on us so there is no way we can ever be lost. In this transformation we find the deepest desire of our hearts and relief for our most private pain.

Then the Spirit boots us out the door and into the world, where there's a whole lot more that needs transforming—so much greed, so much fear, so much suffering. And what never ceases to amaze me is that, one, God really does see a day when all of that has passed away, a world with human beings still in it that doesn't function in that old dominating way, a world where life grows and flourishes and is poured out

abundantly upon the whole creation. God can see this day and has it in the master plan to accomplish it.

And the other thing that really amazes me is that God wants us to be partners in this effort. Seems to me we'd be more of a liability, since we're the source of most of the problems. But God keeps coming back to use us as vehicles and tools and mouthpieces for grace. And we know that it is in giving ourselves to this work that we find ourselves saved from all that is. As we lose our lives in the ministry of Christ, then do we really find them.

This God we worship must be mighty indeed! We're going to call down the Spirit today, and maybe it's true that we need to put seat belts in the pews and airbags in the hymnal racks. We cannot know all the changes God intends to work in and through us, and indeed the waking God may draw us out where we may never return (Dillard). But we can trust that change, that transformation, trust that Spirit. Because what we do not know and cannot yet see, God can see, and God will do. In the meantime, even the weakest parts of our lives rest in God's gentle embrace.