

Baptism of our Lord, A  
Isaiah 42:1-9  
Acts 10:34-43  
Matthew 3:13-17

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It's been a dark winter – in fact it's been a dark three winters -- but now we have passed the longest night and the days are growing just a bit longer. Light is returning, thanks be to God.

Several days this week I've been up especially early, and each time there's been a reward from nature – really a gift from God's Spirit. A fiery sunrise glowing in the eastern sky. A radiant cauldron of hot pink and flaming orange and purple and red clouds simmering on the horizon, celebrating that beautiful transition just before the sun rises and turns the sky pale and blue. Colors like that seem designed to make you pause and take note: it's a whole new day! Give thanks, set an intention, make the most of this gift from God.

Our gospel reading could be considered the sunrise of Jesus' ministry – his first public appearance, a new day dawning. It is God's baptismal blessing upon Jesus and his commissioning to begin his divine work. It's been something like 30 years since Jesus' birth which we celebrated on Christmas, and all this time God has been preparing him. John the Baptist is offering ritual cleansing for people who confess their sins and seek God's forgiveness. And Jesus doesn't need the same kind of forgiveness, but still he is baptized in solidarity with all people who seek God and trust in God's forgiving love.

Did Jesus know that he himself would become God's most powerful vehicle of forgiveness? That his life would do more to advance grace and love than any other? We don't know. Scripture is silent on that. But we do know Jesus was open to God's calling. He was obedient to God. He cared about “fulfilling all righteousness” and following God's lead – and he would get plenty of practice in that. But this baptism told him he would never travel alone. God's blessing was loud and clear: *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”*

Baptism was the glorious sunrise that launched Jesus' ministry. And we can guess there were many times in struggle or challenges ahead, when Jesus would return to that divine promise, to remember who he was, remember who stood with him forever.

Baptism is a sacred reference point for our lives, too, something we return to, to remember who we are and who stands with us. For most if not all of us, there was a time when we were washed in God's waters of baptism. As babies or children or even adults, the earthly element of water combined with the promise of God's word to give us a new identity: *“You are God's beloved child, with whom God is well pleased.”* And baptism is actually our true identity, the identity we wear closest to our heart. If you'll

forgive a silly analogy, baptism is something like the Wonder Woman leotard or the Spiderman suit we wear under our street clothes. We might look like ordinary people – and we are, wonderfully ordinary human beings – but there is more to us. We are also children of God. We are washed clean by God’s forgiveness, filled to overflowing by God’s unconditional and tender love, we are precious in God’s sight, and our eyes are opened to see every person as God’s beloved and precious child. Accepted just as we are, we are never left the same. Blessed by God’s love, we’re commissioned to bless others. Healed by God’s grace, we become part of God’s work to heal all creation.

Baptism is a blessing, and it is a calling – but there’s more. Baptism is also belonging. Belonging to God forever and belonging to God’s family, Christ’s church.

It’s a beautiful thing to be together as church. No matter how many or how few of us might gather for worship on any given Sunday, it is a blessing. We are given to each other, we belong to each other at a deep level, through God’s Holy Spirit. We might not be able to sense this divine togetherness every single time we meet, but it’s real. In baptism, we are united with Christ in a mystical, eternal way, and we are also united with each other, now and always. We are never alone.

There’s a beautiful passage in Isaiah that could be spoken directly to this community of the baptized, here at First Immanuel. Isaiah 42:

*I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you,  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
A light to the nations.*

God has called us in righteousness. God has taken us by the hand. God has kept us, God is keeping us even now. God has taken us by the hand, and God is bringing us along, making us a light to the nations – a light to anyone who needs God. God is caring for us, God is preserving us, and God is giving us to others as a source of light and love and hope and peace and justice, a beacon, a light to the nations.

It’s a stunning promise. There is no maybe about it. God’s light is even now shining through this congregation. God’s light shines through you. The light of a glorious sunrise. The light of stars sparkling in a dark night sky. The light of God’s justice and love and hope and peace is shining through you, through us, to God’s beloved ones all around. You are shining like the sun, right now, in the power of your baptismal covenant. Thanks be to God.

I’m reminded that while water is central to baptism, there’s another earthly element involved in our baptism ceremony. Fire. The light of a candle. After a person has been baptized, they are presented with a special candle, lighted from the Easter candle, and these words are said: *“Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good*

*works and glorify our Father in heaven.” Many people keep their candle to remember their baptism, and perhaps to light it on their baptismal birthday, to remember God’s promise: *You are a child of God. God’s light shines through you.**

To help us remember this gift, I invite the ushers to share a candle with each of you now. *(ask ushers to start passing out candles)*

The last time we used these candles was on Christmas Eve. We celebrated the birth of Christ, who is the light of God’s love, shining in the world’s darkness. Now we light them to remember how God empowers our lights to shine as well. And if you haven’t yet been baptized, I hope you will consider it. This beautiful gift is for you too!

At home, I invite you to light your candles. Here in the sanctuary I will bring the light down the aisle, and as we share the light from one candle to the next, I invite you to tip the unlit candle over the lit one. And please say the words *“Let your light so shine.”*

*(when all candles are lighted...)*

Through baptism, we are called to be God’s light to this world. And you know, this might seem like a daunting task. Some days maybe we don’t feel so full of light ourselves. Maybe we’ve been through a dark and difficult time. Maybe it’s challenging enough to hold onto our own hope without sharing hope with all the nations. But I invite you to look at that candle flame for a moment. Watch it gently glowing. Notice how much light it gives off from just one little wick.

Just one candle has the power to warm a whole dinner table, to warm up a gathering of people and bring the quality Danish people call “hygge” or coziness and warmth and camaraderie. Just one candle can be a wonder and a blessing. And several candles grouped together – just as many as we have people here today -- they can light up a whole room, a whole house, they can change everything.

To fulfill its divine purpose, this simple candle flame doesn’t need to become a searchlight and light up the whole night sky. It doesn’t have to make itself over into a laser beam with extraordinary abilities. The purpose of this flame is simply to make light and warmth around it.

And that’s our purpose too. To share the light and warmth of God’s love in the most natural way. To shine with mercy and love and compassion as God gives us ability. To shine into dark corners with the illumination Jesus gives us. And know that’s it’s not by our own power, but through God’s love, that we are God’s beloved children. It’s not through our own power but the Spirit’s power that we represent the Living God each day.

So let’s close with a simple song that our children know very well:

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine  
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine  
Let it shine, Let it shine, Let it shine.*

Amen.