

**Sinner Solidarity**  
**A sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – January 9, 2022**

**Please Read:**  
**Isaiah 43:1-7**  
**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

Sir Ken Robinson gave the most viewed *TedTalk* on the importance of developing imagination. He tells the story of a six-year-old girl who is in an art classroom drawing a picture earnestly, and the art teacher comes up to ask the girl what she's drawing? The girl says, "I'm drawing a picture of God." And the teacher replies, "But, nobody knows what God looks like," to which the girl responds confidently, "Well, they will in a minute!"

Sir Robinson continues with another story of his son who took the part of Joseph in a Christmas pageant, which he thought was a major role. When the three wise men came in, however, the spotlight moved significantly. Three four-year-olds marched in clumsily in turbans and bath robes, and the first presented a box before the manger saying, "I bring you gold." The second said, "I bring you myrrh," and the third boy said, after a moment's pause, "Frank sent this!"

The point is kids will take a chance. When they don't know, they'll have a go at it. Children are not afraid to be wrong. Being wrong is not the same as being creative, but what we do know is that if you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original. By the time we're adults, we've lost the capacity to think creatively because we are so averse to being wrong.

All of this is by way of saying that in this sermon, I may be wrong, but I believe the reason we celebrate the baptism of our Lord on this first Sunday of Epiphany, this second Sunday of the New Year, is because from the very beginning, Jesus wants to show God's solidarity with sinners, God's compassion, and love for those who are broken and who have gotten it wrong.

Our Gospel lesson is Luke's account of Jesus' baptism... The verb "to baptize" comes from the Greek word *βαπτίζω* and literally means to be immersed, overwhelmed, or covered. It can also mean *to pickle*. I rather like the idea of being *pickled in Christ*! Baptism is the outward sign of an inner grace or transformation of the heart and mind. John's baptism was for the repentance of sins, for people wanting to make a clean start, looking for God's redemption.

This should raise in your mind the question why Jesus received the baptism of John? Jesus did not need repentance, did he? He did not have sin in his life... In *the letter to the Hebrews* we read Jesus was tempted in every way, but without sin.<sup>1</sup> So why does Jesus come to John for baptism?

The baptism of Jesus points not to Jesus' own need for repentance, but rather to his solidarity with and compassion for a humanity with a great need for repentance. Whether it's the traumatizing memories of a year ago with the insurrection at the capital, or the growing frustration around the pandemic and what all the numbers really mean, or the possibility that

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<sup>1</sup> See *Hebrews 4:15*.

someone intentionally started the fires that destroyed hundreds of homes in Colorado last week, or the gun violence in this country and around the world, or the need for healing in our relationships, we know that we are broken and sinful people.

Jesus is the Epiphany of God and God's love for a broken world, a broken humanity. He willingly submits himself to baptism, to go down into the waters of our chaotic reality, to show *the way of salvation begins with nothing more and nothing less than the grace of God.*

In baptism God calls us into being, from darkness - from the hollow hopes and dreams of our own endeavors to the light, the solid truth that we are valued and loved simply because of who God is. In baptism God puts a seal upon us that guarantees the promises of eternal life and challenges us with the sinewy responsibilities of discipleship in Jesus' name. In baptism the Lord calls us out of our own self-absorption and existential individualism into the Body of Christ and the communion of saints, into participatory community life in order that we might learn to give and receive care and build up one another in love.

The question is, how do we really do this? I'm quite sure it doesn't mean becoming more religious. Again, I may be wrong, but there have been some recent articles about the growth of paganism. This may sound shocking to you, but I don't see paganism as a threat but an opportunity for faith. C.S. Lewis, perhaps the greatest apologist of the Christian faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, argued that in order to live out our Christian faith, we all need to become more pagan!<sup>2</sup> What he meant was that we all need to find our way back to that childhood imagination and openness to the Mystery of life, what Sir Robinson calls that freedom to be wrong, that allows us not just to *think* about things, but to creatively *experience* and *explore* the reality of things, people, relationships, the world and all its natural beauty and awe-filled wonder all around us!

The etymology of the word pagan is interesting. *Pagus* in Latin simply means "country" and *paganus* means "villager." Perhaps the English slang term would be "hick." I don't like terms like this but it's important to admit the word pagan has negative connotations that I think are largely unwarranted. Paganism simply refers to the folk-religion and belief systems held to by people who have not had the benefit of a more formal education. There are all kinds of pagan beliefs, much of it the same as folklore or legend.

We, the people of the Book, wrestle with what theologians call *natural* theology and *revealed* theology. We have doctrine about God that has been developed over the centuries based on our experience, and we have understanding about God revealed to us by God through the great prophets of old. Eventually, these stories, these words of the law and the prophets, whether historical, prose, parabolic or proverbial, have been recorded over the centuries and we have our Bible, a library, a collection of books (66 in most Protestant Bibles 39 Hebrew writings and 27 Greek writings!) that have been authored by different writers over hundreds of years and from different religious and cultural perspectives.

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?"

The point is that we believe God reveals bits of truth about who God really is through these scriptures, and that's why we come here today to worship and learn, that's why we read from the book, and affirm things like, "This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God," and "Holy Wisdom, Holy Word, thanks be to God!"

But we must be very clear about this: God's Word to us is not *words*. God's Word is not simply ideas or doctrines. God's Word is the substrate of all reality, the Logos, the Word become Flesh full of grace and truth. We use words to talk about the Word, but the ultimate revelation of God for those of us who call ourselves *Christian* is the person of Jesus Christ. His life, death and resurrection are the main parts of this unfolding story of God's redemption intervention, of this deeper reality the Holy Spirit invites us to experience each and every day, the living truth that we are beloved and that *nothing* can separate us from God's love...

God desires that we don't just "understand" but "experience" redemption in Christ, because it has everything to do with how we participate in God's redemptive work in the world. The term redemption in our Isaiah text means simply to "buy back" or to "purchase." The word the prophet uses here is interesting. It's the verb form of a noun that referred to a person, a *goel*; someone in the family who everyone trusted. They were the person you would go to fix a problem. If a person became impoverished, and forced to sell property, or even their own freedom to pay for their debts, the duty of their *goel* was to pay a ransom so that the person's property or liberty may be restored to them. Isaiah claims that this role of *goel*, or Redeemer, is who God is for the people of Israel.

But here is the amazing thing: We in the church believe that God literally became the *goel* for us in Jesus, and that Jesus gave himself as a ransom for us. In other words, God gave God-self to set us free from our guilt and shame. We are forgiven and set free by what Christ has done for us that we could not do for ourselves.

We participate in God's gracious work if we have experienced if we have received God's gracious work in our own lives. I believe God's grace helps us to hit the reset button, to become as innocent children to creatively experience freedom as beloved, and then to creatively, authentically show God's love and grace to others.

It's different than being "religious." Religion can turn "good deeds so quickly into "self-righteousness," what Mark Twain called becoming "a good man in the worst sense of the word." I like the story about Winston Churchill and his political opponent Cripps, a man who was widely disliked for his self-righteous attitude. When Cripps smugly stopped smoking cigars, Churchill commented, "Too bad. Those cigars were his last contact with humanity." Another story goes, Churchill saw Cripps passing by and remarked, "There, but for the grace of God, goes God!" We are not called to be self-righteous. Rather, we are called to live a humble life of loving God and loving others, transformed by Jesus' righteousness, the grace of God; God with us and at work within and through us!

I'm so thankful for the Flanagan family joining our church family, and for the gift of music that Terry will continue to bring to us. He will be playing Widor's Toccata as a postlude for us today, one of my favorite organ pieces. I shared with him and some of you that as a young child at the First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, I sat on the floor in the sanctuary just around the organ console to watch Reginald Lund play the Toccata at Easter. It was glorious. I think music is one of the ways God helps us get back in touch with our inner child. I can *think* about the composition of some of my favorite music, but the point is to experience it, to be swept away beyond thinking to wonder, love, and praise...

Maybe that's why we have a couple of stories about Jesus' childhood, but don't have a lot of details. Jesus never lost his childlike innocence, wonder, love, and praise. And in going down into the waters of baptism with us, he is offering again that childlike genuineness and authenticity to us. To experience the fullness of God's redeeming presence.

So friends, I hope you perceive the wonder and the glory of our goel Jesus, who took upon himself the form of a servant, who in baptism went down into the murky waters of our reality, obedient unto death, even death on a cross, and who was raised again for us, and promises to raise us all up to experience his glory!

Despite the challenges and brokenness, we may face, as we begin this new year 2022 may we receive the grace to get in touch with our deepest pagan selves, with childlike naivete to re-imagine a God who genuinely loves us, a God who is in solidarity with us, a God who became one of us to find and redeem us simply because we are beloved. And may God's love be our motivation to share in God's redemptive work in the world for all people.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*