

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
January 16, 2011
Matthew 3:13-17; Chapel Worship
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

What a great day this is – it is such a joy to celebrate the sacrament of baptism at any time, but made even more special and even profound when it's with the confirmation class – when a confirmand decides to be baptized it's wonderful. Almost every year there's one in the class who has not yet been baptized – and since the rite of confirmation builds on the sacrament, it's important to do this first. When Mira came by the church after school a couple of weeks ago to tell me she wanted to be baptized this day in worship, it was, I think, a special moment for both of us.

And what better time than on the day the church celebrates Jesus' baptism by John– that day when Jesus ministry began. When Jesus, like us, receives the power of the Holy Spirit, to go forth and live as God has called him, calls us, to live. On that day when Jesus, when we, receive the strength to do just that. This is a profoundly important day in Mira's life and in our life together as the gathered community.

How can this be? Our baptism surely must not be the same big deal as Jesus' baptism. Well, because the church does remind us every year at this time about Jesus' baptism, it should be a clue that our own baptism is vitally important too. We should remember the day – even if we were baptized as little babies, we will hear stories from our families about that special day. We should celebrate the fact that we too were baptized with power and the Holy Spirit – the same Spirit that descended on Jesus like a dove. We might not get the visual of the dove and the sky broken open, but we are equally graced, filled with the Spirit, adopted as God's own, and given a ministry and mission for our lives. It is just that important.

We've heard the story of Jesus' special day – the day he quietly joins the crowd at the River Jordan, among the people being baptized by his cousin John with water – the water of repentance. John has been telling the crowd that one would come who would be much more powerful than he – one who would baptize them with fire and with the Spirit. Imagine how strange this sounded to the people gathered – they had no idea what that meant, who he was talking about. What did they think this would look like: someone powerful and mighty, coming with great fanfare! But on that day only John spots him – nobody else did – it's only John who recognizes the greatness of the man in front of him. He's not sure he should be baptizing Jesus – it should be the other way around. There's no loud excitement, no fire, nothing different. Yet it's all different. Imagine the people in the crowd looking around to see this man that John sees. There's Jesus, showing solidarity with his community, his willingness to be counted among these people of God – just as Mira will in a few moments. Jesus is showing those gathered at the River Jordan, and us, that God in person lives among us, lives like us – oh yes, there was excitement when Jesus was baptized – not what the people watching expected though – we read the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and a voice declaring, "This is my Son which whom I am well pleased."

And the same is true for us – we too receive the power and grace to accept our own ministry and mission as offered to us by God, whether we’re baptized as infants or adults. We’re now part of the body of Christ.

Baptism should be life changing. Imagine what the church might look like if each baptized member grabbed hold of and used the power that is freely given us by God in our baptism. We too can make a difference in our world! Doesn’t Jesus constantly tell his followers, and us, that we must take up Jesus’ ministry and continue spreading the good news? Aren’t we supposed to care for the poor, build up the weak, and spread peace? Listen carefully as we celebrate the sacrament today, as Mira makes promises, as we make promises to walk with her on her journey – we can make a difference in our world. Those words are important!

The question is will we live out those promises – how will we live them out? Imagine the power of the church, of the gathered Body of Christ in our common ministry. Imagine the explosion of peace and joy that could be ours, imagine what the world would look like if we all did God’s work – treated each other as children of God! Imagine what the world would look like if we loved each other as God loves us.

Our baptism is just as profound and important as Jesus’ was there at the Jordan River. It’s at the moment of baptism when we receive our identity – when we are named – that’s the christening part. Named as children of God. God says to each of us – you are my beloved child. I delight in you. Take a moment and say that to yourself – insert your name there – Cindy, you are my beloved child. With you I am pleased. Awesome, isn’t it. The words embrace us and promise to hold us. And this is where our own ministry begins.

Who am I? That’s the question I hear over and over again from people, no matter their age - they don’t always use those words but that’s what they are asking. There are lots of answers out there for us - the world has lots of definitions from advertisers, movies, songs, who try to tell us who we are: that our body is our most important possession - nurture it, love it, care for it. You’re a brain, a rational, thinking, reasoning being. You’re a maker of money, spender of money - a consumer of “things” that define who we are. The world tells us nobody will look out for you but you. Look out for number one.

And these questions last as long as we live and breathe. As long as we try to find our way in this world. So, do we answer the question then? – I suggest we look into the water of baptism. The reflection you see there is who you really are - you are someone to whom a name has been given. That name is Christian and we learn throughout our lives what it is to be called by that name. That name is a gift - unearned, unmerited, undeserved. It’s given to us by grace and by grace alone.

We are claimed. It’s at the moment of baptism when we are claimed as children of God – with all the accountability, responsibility, and blessing that comes with that. We are claimed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We are called into the ministry of the Spirit – we are changed people! And we are empowered to participate fully in the ministry of Christ in the world. And that means we do not rest as long as one of God’s children is in misery, hungry, naked, oppressed, persecuted, lost. We do not rest as long as any institution, government, or person seeks to warp God’s image in any of God’s children.

In the early rites of baptism, the church made this much more clear. The newly baptized Christian was given a new white robe, symbolic of the new life that was being lived, to be in ministry with Christ in the world. Later, a Bible was given, a sign that this new Christian was to be in the world, preaching and teaching.

We are claimed - the Christian message is not that we should try hard to be somebody - to act like somebody. The Christian message is simply that we are somebody. Remember who you are. And remember whose you are.

We are named. We are claimed.

And we are loved. God says to each of us at our baptism: you are my beloved child. I delight in you. Don't we need to be reminded of that. Don't we need to know that deep within our very being. Don't we all want to know we matter. This needs to be made real for us.

There was a woman in the fight both of and for her life - her struggle with alcoholism. About 15 years ago she nearly died from alcohol related disease and had been sober for 13 years. She began drinking again and she was out of control again, literally risking everything - her health, her children, her job, her home. We spent hours together - at least 4 trips to detox facilities - each time within 24 hours she was drinking again.

One night her 15 year old son called me asking me to come to the house as soon as I could get there. She was really bad. I went and found her as you would expect. After spending some time with the son and his 10 year old sister, I sat on the couch with her. She was quiet for a while and then looked at me, "Why do you bother?"

Because you are a child of God. You are somebody. Because we are all created in God's image and that's good. Because God loves you.

It has been a long and hard struggle for this woman - at the moment she's sober. I hope it will last. But I can't guarantee it. But what I do know is this: that God did not, has not, and will not give up on her or you or me. God won't quit.

We are named. We are claimed. We are loved. And we're also called. One reason we are all here in worship this Sunday or any Sunday is to listen for and respond to that call. We're here to figure out what our call is, to claim our own ministry, to learn what it will take to be a good minister of the gospel wherever God has planted us - in all phases of our life together: here in the ministry of this church, our daily lives in school or at work, at home or out with friends - wherever we spend our time. And we sure do need each other to do that - we certainly need God's help to do that - and it's by our baptism that we gain the strength to do that.

We are strengthened and surrounded by the Holy Spirit, by the love of God that passes all understanding, by the peace that comes in knowing that, no matter what, we are loved, and we know that Jesus has walked that road ahead of us. As Jesus was named, claimed, loved, and called - so are we. That's the promise. That's the truth. We can do this!

Mira, thank you for the opportunity for us to be reminded of the gracious gift of baptism - thank you for coming forward to be baptized yourself and for the opportunity to renew our own baptismal vows - it's a gift God freely gives to each of us. Let us accept it with joy and thanksgiving.

Let us pray:

Loving Lord, each time we pause to take stock of our life's journey, every time we pause to remember who we are, we also remember whose we are. We are your beloved children, cherished, gifted, loved. For all the good that has come to us through your grace, for all that has been, and is, and is yet to be, by your grace, we give thanks.

Enable us, we pray, for hear your call, to recognize your leading, to be aware that you have a place for us, a role for us, a responsibility for us - each one. Help us to minister to your honor and to your glory. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Morning prayer, January 16, 2011

Our morning prayers today are taken from the resources of the World Council of Churches as we begin the annual week of prayer for Christian unity, first observed in 1968. Each year Christian churches around the world join together in this observance, each year with a different theme. The theme for 2011 is “the church in Jerusalem, yesterday, today and tomorrow” – two thousand years ago the first disciples of Christ gathered in Jerusalem experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and were joined together in unity as the body of Christ. In that event, Christians of every time and place see their origin as a community of the faithful, called together to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Although that earliest Jerusalem church experienced difficulties, both externally and internally, its members persevered in faithfulness and fellowship, in breaking bread and prayers. The churches in Jerusalem today offer us a vision of what it means to strive for unity, even amid great problems. They show us that the call to unity can be more than mere words, and indeed that it can point us toward a future where we anticipate and help build the heavenly Jerusalem.

And on the weekend of observance of the life and vision of Dr. Martin Luther King, this is a timely and worthy goal. We know Dr. King was much more than a civil rights champion - he was a man who lived his entire life in service to others, speaking out against poverty, economic injustice, and violence. Through his leadership, he showed us what we can accomplish when we stand together. Let us now gather in prayer alongside our brothers and sisters in faith around the world:

Almighty and Merciful God, with great power you gathered together the first Christians in the city of Jerusalem, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, defying the earthly power of the Roman empire. Grant that, like this first church in Jerusalem, we may come together to be bold in preaching and living the good news of reconciliation and peace, wherever there is inequality and injustice.

Lord God our Father, we rejoice that in all times, places and cultures, there are people who reach out to you in prayer. Above all we thank you for the example and teaching of your Son, Jesus Christ, who has taught us to long in prayer for the coming of your Kingdom. Teach us to pray better as Christians together, so that we may always be aware of your guidance and encouragement through all our joys and distress, through the power your Holy Spirit.

Gracious God, make your people a loving people, show us how to walk in love; to be open to you in the very depths of our being. Fill us with truth and love, so that we might be your heralds in this world. In a world where many feel unloved, where the truth of who they are is hidden from them, make us heralds of truth.

Remake us as we worship you, so that our nature is transformed, so that actions of truth and love come naturally, so that our habits and behaviors be deeply shaped by you, so that our way of engaging with the world reflects your ways.

Fill us with grace and truth, Fill our world with grace and truth,
And make us faithful heralds of grace and truth.

God of our birth and our life, God of our joy and our pain, we trust that beyond our pain, there can be healing. Beyond the brokenness within our hearts, our families and our community there can be reconciliation.

We trust that beyond our anger can be peace. We trust that beyond our hurting hearts there can be forgiveness.

We trust that beyond our silence God's presence speaks. Challenge us to affirm and act on our belief that life may come to be the place where our faith remains, where our hope endures, and love abides forever.

We pray for our brothers and sisters, your family, here and around the world that all may be called out of darkness into your marvelous light.

Give us a vision, grant us wisdom, grant us strength as you call us out into your light. Call us, God, that we may follow you, not only as one who goes ahead but as one who journeys with us and may we be content to learn the meaning of your way as we walk in it.

All this we ask in the name of your son, our brother, Jesus Christ. Amen!