

1.08.23 – 1st Sunday of Epiphany

“The Light of Baptism”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-9 (NRSVue)

¹ Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
² He will not cry out or lift up his voice
or make it heard in the street;
³ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth,
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
⁶ 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,
⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
⁸ I am the Lord; that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
⁹ See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

L: These are Words of Prophecy! All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 3:13-17 (NRSVue)

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Leader: This is an Account of Jesus’ Baptism. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Father God, we are so grateful for your incarnate Son, Jesus! During Advent, as we emptied our hearts and minds to receive your son, we now ask you to fill us with the memories of our own baptism. Lord, help us to understand these passages in a way we can apply to the whole new year of 2023. May we hear a personal message from you this morning through your words in me. Be with those who cannot be here today. Amen.

If I haven't yet seen you in 2023, I wish you a Happy New Year!

Thank you to the Sandwich team of workers that came both on Wednesday to do their normal mission work and came again on Thursday to help take down the Christmas decorations in the church! With so many hands it took only 2 hours! And we had some fun, too! We will schedule it more officially for next year, so thanks again (you know who you are!).

During the holidays, we focused on the light of Jesus' birth with candle lighting and scriptures. On Christmas Eve we lit the Christ candle and agreed as we passed the light to one another to share it with the world. Isaiah and Matthew today prepare us to see the light of Christ in new ways, so I encourage you to ponder your New Year with Christ's light in mind. How will you share this light? How will the light of Christ manifest itself in our Divine Experiments this year?

The Isaiah prophecy is a familiar one and possibly one Jesus may have recalled during his baptism. Surely, he felt like the servant Isaiah spoke of. Yet some scholars say the "My Servant" phrase refers to a hero in past Israelite history like Moses, Jacob, Daniel, David, or even Israel herself. Evangelicals believe the prophet is referring to Jesus, the coming Messiah. That is what I learned years ago, and I believe it reflects many of Isaiah's undisputed Messianic prophecies. It also fits into our Christmas message of the incarnate Jesus, that God chose him to be his servant to bring righteousness to the world. God also promises to assist

his servant in carrying out his will (“I have put my Spirit upon him” – Isaiah 61:1); and though he hints at troubles coming, God’s justice will prevail. He will be a new covenant for the people, helping to fulfill God’s promise to Israel and he would be a light for the Gentiles (Is. 49:6) as his word spreads through the apostles.

Remember from last week in Isaiah 52 that King Cyrus physically released the captives in Babylon, but in our passage Isaiah 49, the prophet predicts a spiritual release that pagan idols cannot provide; only a two-way relationship with God can; Jeremiah speaks this as well in 29:11-14a:

¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity (Jer. 29:11-14a).

This divine prophetic wisdom is God’s glorious gift to us at any time, especially at Christmas with the virgin birth of his incarnate son and as we face a new calendar year. Epiphany, occurring on January 6th or on the first Sunday after January 1st, is a feast day celebrating the revealing of God in the person of Jesus either to the Magi (the Gentile three kings) or to those present (& to a future us) at Jesus’ Baptism. You can google the word “Epiphany” to find out many more rituals besides a feast in both Eastern and Western Christianity. By this day we are reminded that God is creator of heaven, earth, and humankind. Let us hear him acclaim and affirm his son in the Matthew passage: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased (Mt. 3:17).”

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Since Jesus' immaculate birth and the flight to Egypt, in Matthew, there is no other account of Jesus' life until John the Baptist in Chapter 3. So, we ask ourselves if Jesus is sinless, why would he need baptism by water for repentance? He needed John's baptism to identify with sinners and to authenticate his divine role; the voice that came from the heavens was God's and was spoken again at the Transfiguration: "While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him (Mt. 17:5b)!" This verified that Jesus was the son of God. As we journeyed through Advent, Christmas, the wise men, and now John the Baptist struggling to understand why he should be so honored to baptize Jesus, we recall how the baby, filled with the spirit, jumped in Elizabeth's womb when Mary who was carrying Jesus came near. And John knew his role was to prepare the way for the Messiah. More affirmation that Jesus was the son of God! When confronted by the divinity himself, John humanly questioned his own spiritual baptism and role here, but proceeded anyway. Have you remembered your baptism? Did you really understand it? Reaffirm it today, right now in your soul, as we move through Epiphany toward Lent.

This was the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and word spread that yes, he might be the Messiah, but he was also like the people, and had been baptized by John the baptizer. This symbol was the beginning of Christ's public submission to God's plan. The reward was the Spirit which descended onto him in the form of a dove. The light from heaven shone down upon him and Jesus shared his light with others the rest of his life through miracles, healings, teaching, death, and resurrection. We see

this spirit again at the cross, the tomb, the appearances on the beach, and yes at Pentecost! And the voice of God was audible!

We spent last year listening for that voice. Please remember what you've heard in the last year, and continue to listen for his voice. What a wonderful way to begin the year of Divine Experiments, knowing that God is before, during, and within any work we attempt. The Messiah came to earth on our behalf; he saved us from our own sin at the cross; and rose again to be with God in the heavens to one day welcome us there. Isn't that a message we need to share with others who do not know Jesus? The birth at Bethlehem was just the beginning; the light of his baptism is just the next step. We can teach the rest by example as we gather in community actions and activities this year, knowing that he is the light in everything we do. I hope you're as excited as I am to “¹⁹Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: ²⁰Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world (Mt. 28:19-20 ^{KJV}).” May God bless our efforts for a fresh start in this new year. Amen! ||

Will you pray with me? God of all things, we thank you for these words to remind us of our baptismal commitment. May our faith, trust, and commitment to the Messiah grow and daily demonstrate to the world your love and light. Bring transformational work into our lives, the church, and the world as we explore what “divine experiments” you have in store for us. We thank you for the courage to risk and obey. **Amen.**