**“Re-Member”** Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson
Baptism of the Lord The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 Saint Paul, Minnesota
January 12, 2025

When last we were together here, it was in the company of Mary and Elizabeth–two pregnant women caught up in the Spirit and full-hearted participants in God’s plan. Today, we fast-forward 30 years and hear about their sons. The powerful son of a Wild Woman and the wild son of the older Wise Woman meet in the wilderness in Mark and Matthew; in Luke is less clear.

John’s passion for justice and the poor is an echo of what Jesus will teach, as he tells his followers, “If you have two coats give one away”; do not cheat when collecting taxes; do not extort money with threats. John’s good news came from the scrolls of Isaiah and the simplicity of his life. John had a more apocalyptic nature which we know because he said things like, “You brood of vipers” and “The ax is ready to cut down any tree that does not bear fruit.” John knew what he was to be about and he ministered with such integrity that people had to ask themselves and one another if John was the Messiah. John knew there was another coming with greater power and a worthy mission and he said so. But, in this gospel, in the few verses we do not read, John was arrested by Herod before Jesus was baptized.

As a gospel writer, Luke was methodical, obsessive even in his writing; he believed he was inscribing the definitive account of Jesus’ life. He would probably not have counted on a book like the Bible coming together with four gospel accounts that, the modern mind, 584 years post-printing press, would blend together. We know that John had followers and today we must consider that they continued John’s ministry of baptism. Afterall, the efficacy of the sacraments is always in God’s hands. Because John is not present, Luke is not specific about Jesus receiving a baptism of repentance; as Jesus was known to be without sin, for what did he need to repent? Luke recorded the baptism “of many” but he also recorded that for only one did the skies open and for only one did the Spirit descend. People were asking if John was the Messiah; John sent his followers to ask Jesus if he is the One and finally it is the Spirit who makes clear Jesus is the Son of God.

On this Sunday named for the baptism of the Lord we have this wonderful reading from Isaiah. Jesus’ baptism is but a reflection of God’s historic relationship with humanity. God created us, formed us, saves us, and called us by name. “I will be with you,” is God’s promise; “you shall not be burned nor will you be consumed.” “Because you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you, . . ..”

Baptism represents this depth of love. Our Presbyterian roots tell us that this is a sacrament of grace. We are taught from birth that the water symbolizes our salvation which is the gift of a loving God: “I have redeemed you … you are mine.” It asks us only to receive the gift. We cannot earn it, we cannot deserve it, we cannot do anything to accomplish it. It is given and we (are only to) receive. This is why, in a world of indigenous gods, Walter Brueggemann points out that the God of the Hebrews was distinctly unique.

Brueggemann wrote, “What marks Adonai/YHWH as decisively different from all other gods . . . , is YHWH’s capacity to ‘feel with’ and to ‘feel for’ Israel in the deepest, most intimate ways.” That is the reason that Israel’s poets must regularly appeal to images of “husband-wife” and “parent-child” in order to portray the passion of this God who knows nothing of “compassion fatigue.” In her most remarkable exposition of YHWH’s compassion, Phyllis Trible *. . .*  has shown how the Hebrew word for ‘compassion’ (*rhm*) is linked to the Hebrew word for ‘womb’ (*rhm)*; both words share the same consonants but with different vowel pointing. Her rendering of Jeremiah 30:20 has these concluding lines: ‘Therefore my *womb* trembles for him; I will truly show motherly *compassion* upon him’.”

“These attestations to the maternal instincts of [God] signify that there is no end to compassion on the part of [God], a capacity that runs even beyond the deep compassion of a mother for her child. The God to whom the gospel bears witness is profoundly and precisely marked by compassion, by a capacity to be stirred internally in solidarity with those in pain and in need” (“Not Numb Inside”, Walter Brueggemann).

This quote from Brueggemann comes from a blog titled “Not Numb Inside.” He was responding to a book titled, *The End of Empathy: Why White Protestants Stopped Loving Their Neighbors*. The author, John Compton is a political historian and, in the book, he goes through the history of social reforms including ending slavery, child labor laws, and gender equality with an eye toward the Mainline religious ethics that guided them. And then, Compton analyzes the more recent ebbing away of concern for the marginalized among voters. In his response, Brueggeman would like to turn the public back to Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth, “The members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (I Cor. 12:25-26).

It is important to say here and now, that all things, all people were created by God and all are chosen. God’s love is poured out for the human family as well as the planet and creation. And I wonder, in this particular economy of individual worth decided by the value of our skills, size of our bank account, and in the heightened focus on individuality and self, if our struggle to freely receive such love is part of what prompts us to judge others as unworthy of such compassion. John knew what he was doing in connecting baptism with repentance.

Dr. Julia O’Brien wrote, “It is important, … to notice when the need for affirmation for ourselves blinds us to the needs of others. In [our passage from Isaiah], for example, other nationalities are not themselves chosen ones, but rather collateral exchanged for Jerusalem's redemption. Although the location of Seba is not known, . . . the Hebrew term Cush refers to a kingdom south of Egypt and is sometimes translated as ‘Ethiopia’ or ‘Sudan’. When read through the lens of the transatlantic slave trade, the seizure of African kingdoms for the enrichment of others is profoundly disturbing. And yet, when read through a hermeneutic of affirmation, the acknowledgment of their wealth and status underscores the prominence of Africa and Africans in the Bible that is too often read as a ‘white’ text.”

Another rabbinical source believes that the meaning here is that as King Cyrus of Persia turned toward a battle with those African kingdoms and so he released the Hebrew people from exile as he shifted his focus to the south. Amid the complexity of the history of kingdoms and political machinations, God rises above the fray to love humanity and try to lead us into communities where we can do the work of loving one another through reconciliation and peace. Baptism calls us to this work; it feeds us questions; and it will, at times, make us uncomfortable with revealed truths.

As the World Council of Churches document on the sacraments states, “Baptism is related not only to momentary experience, but to life-long growth in Christ. …The life of the Christian is necessarily one of continuing struggle yet also of continuing experience of grace. In this new relationship, the baptized live for the sake of Christ, of his Church and of the world which he loves, . . ..” (Rom. 8:18-24; I Cor. 15:22-28, 49-57). Baptism is our identity, it is our location, and it is our mission.

Whenever we go on a pilgrimage, the group creates a covenant. A covenant is an agreed-upon guideline for how to be together. Biblically, the practice of covenant characterized God’s relationship with God’s people. It defines who God is and what God does–as in our scripture from Isaiah today.

One of the examples of a covenant that I share with the pilgrimage group as we begin our process, was written by a group of Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic women who traveled to Poland and the Czech Republic as participants in a Women’s Interfaith Holocaust tour. Professor Mary Ferrell Bednarowski, who is now retired from United Theological Seminary, was among the travelers; she said, “In some mysterious way, we acquired a wisdom about how to be together, with our very different fears and our very different kinds of courage, and with our very different life stories and religious traditions at stake” (Church and Society, May/June, 1994).

As the women were about to enter the gates of Auschwitz, the Jewish woman who organized the tour said, “We will enter Auschwitz as sisters,” and then they all read these words together:

We will be together in these places.

We will watch out for each other.

We will listen to whatever needs to be said.

We will not be fearful or anxious or prodding when it seems that silence is the only possible response.

We will wait for the slowest.

We will sooner or later catch up with the fastest.

We will dry the tears of those who are weeping and know that they will dry ours when the time comes.

We will let ourselves begin to feel at least a little of the pain of those we have considered our enemies.

We will let ourselves feel the pain of being thought of as someone else’s enemy: not the pain of hurt feelings or of being misunderstood, but the pain of acknowledging all those strands of history that have put so many barriers between us.

We will not forget the joy of life; we will not forget to be grateful.

We will do our best to stir in each other the courage to act with love and justice in our own particular lives.

We will be together in these places.

Today we offer the opportunity to renew our baptismal vows and to receive anointing as a symbol of God’s amazing grace and love. We are invited to imagine and remember our origins–the womb of the Creator God where life began and which nurtures us still. And ultimately, we have a constant invitation to Re-Member ourselves in Christian community and say to each other for whatever is to come, “We will be together in these places.” Thanks be to God. Amen.