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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Z32  
Vine Sermon (Reading for: 1 Epiphany Year C)  
Wednesday 4 September 2019

Isaiah 43:1-7  
Lk. 3:15-17, 21-22

### **Baptism into Chaos, Joy and a New People**

*"Do not fear for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine" (Isa. 43).*

Before they expanded the harbor on the north rim of Half Moon Bay we used to go there during winter storms on days when triple overhead surf made it almost impossible to paddle out at Ocean Beach. My friend Mike and I drove in from Oakland late one December afternoon in his roofing pickup truck. It smelled like cigar smoke and neoprene wetsuits. The ocean didn't look good but we came so far that we felt like we had to go in. So we paddled our surfboards out at Princeton Jetty in rough waters.

Sometimes out there you become so intent on just trying to survive that for a few moments you almost forget about the surfing. That probably wasn't so much the case that day, I don't remember. Mike went in early and I was vaguely conscious of him standing on the beach watching me.

Just before sunset large waves push a terrifying darkness before them as they eclipse light from the low-hanging sun. I took off on one cold wave that seemed impossibly steep and tucked in as the lip pitched over my head and a sheet of water formed a perfect barrel. It was almost as if I stepped out of the world and into the presence of the holy. Surrounded by danger and chaos I felt the strangest calm and such a deep sense of joy that part of me is still in that wave and in that moment.

Even today twenty-five years later I love being in the water. My wife says that for me it is like therapy. I leave the continent behind, time stops and I receive whatever gift God may want to give me in that moment. So often the experience is not even about the waves that I rode but the whales breaching offshore, or the way that a million rain drops just seemed to hover over the water, or an encounter with an old friend.

Jude thought that this passion for riding waves might have something to do with baptism and so he invited me here today to speak about this connection. I have three parts on the way we are baptized into chaos, baptized into joy and baptized into the people of God.

1. Chaos. Christian tradition has this idea of a sacrament. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. We are spiritual beings but our bodies are

the way that we experience God. In other words faith is not just something that happens in our conscious mind. We are constantly experiencing more than we can realize through stories, symbols, images, and through tangible things that engage our whole selves.

The sixteenth century reformers believed in water, bread and wine. For them baptism and Eucharist (or Holy Communion) were the only two sacraments. They were the way that we meet God every week. The puritan John Calvin (1509-1564) writes that baptism is a, "sign of the initiation by which we are received into" the Christian community. He used Paul's metaphor of a shoot that is engrafted into Jesus to describe how we become part of Christ.<sup>1</sup> God adopts us as homeless children.

The water symbolizes life. All life requires water. It is a sign of becoming free in the way that the people of God passed through the waters of the Red Sea into their freedom. It symbolizes being purified or made clean. It also refers to death, the way that we participate in Christ's death and also share in his resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

This is where the chaos comes in. A certain part of our self has to die in order to truly belong to God. The self that always demands on having its own way, the self that thoughtlessly harms others, the self that insists on always being pampered, the self that constantly agonizes over how it is being perceived by others – that self has to pass away.

The way that this happens is that we become part of God's world. We stop constantly trying to protect our ego and put ourselves in situations that may not otherwise choose. We go to the places where people are hurting because that is where Jesus is.

The theologian Rowan Williams (1950-) writes about this. He says that baptism involves recovering the humanity that God intends for us.<sup>3</sup> Quite simply we become more human when we step out of what is comfortable and go to the places where we are not always in control, into the chaos that is real life.

2. Joy. When Martin Luther was in danger he used to tap himself on the forehead and say, "Remember Martin that you have been baptized!" We are baptized into joy. Imagine what it would be like to always live with the full knowledge that we are loved by God, to never forget, or fail to believe that we are God's children. How would we be different if we had that confidence?

We would not be afraid of what other people thought about us. We could speak honestly about what was on our mind. We would care less about our appearance or job security or what other people thought about our accomplishments.

Others would look more like our brothers and sisters instead of like objects that were in our way, or in competition with us for love or money. We would care more about equality, fairness and justice. We would worry less about the future, about dying. We could trust the goodness of our existence and live in a kind of perpetual rush of gratitude.

In short we would experience a healthy inner life. This is the joy that God desires for us. The prophet Isaiah writes about this uncanny feeling of being protected by God. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you... when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned... for I am the Lord your God... Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you... Do not fear, for I am with you" (Isa. 43).

In his Gospel Luke says that heaven is opened or unlocked or revealed in Jesus' baptism. That voice from heaven says the same thing to us too. "You are my child, the beloved" (Lk. 3). God's spirit comes into us. That is what this joy is. It is the love that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have for each other. We participate in this. We are baptized into joy.

3. People of God. Finally, baptism is the way that we become part of the church. When I studied the question I was astonished by how much Christians have in common with each other. One difference though arises over the question of whether to baptize children or have them grow up and decide to put themselves forward for baptism as adults.

We baptize children because we want them to be full members of the church right from the beginning. It's not so much about our decision to follow God as it is about God's decision to choose us.

Baptism brings us to this table with other people who feel invited by God to share in this life together. Rowan Williams writes about this also. He says, "There is no way to be a Christian without being in the neighborhood of other Christians... We receive life from others' prayers and love, and we give the prayer and love that others need... We are implicated in one another, our lives are interwoven."<sup>4</sup>

My own children have been profoundly shaped by the people they met in church. There they have met: the rascals and misfits, egotists and geniuses, gossips and caregivers, the onetime visitor and the faithful ones who go to every church event. Together we remind each other what is really important and we show each other the integrity of the Christian life.

Every summer a lady in her 80's named Alice Larse would always have a pool party for the teenagers of the church. Our church used to host a rotating homeless shelter. We would take guests for one month along with eleven other churches. When an emergency came up, Alice ended up taking the homeless people into her own home.

Alice is not crazy, or naïve, or odd. She is like you and me, except a perhaps braver, kinder version. She is humble because she knows that her gifts come from God. Church has brought so many people like this into my life and the life of my children.

My surfing friend Mike was also one of those people from church. He saw me make that barrel in Half Moon Bay. I felt so proud as we talked about it in the truck on the way home. When he taught me to surf he was introducing me to a lifetime of putting myself into chaos, finding unforgettable joy and a new community of friends. It was like a kind of symbol for our baptism. We were brothers in Christ stepping off the rocks into the heart of chaos and finding moments of inexpressible joy together.

When the storm builds and the waves of life are pushing darkness before them into your path, when you are afraid, remember that you have been baptized. You are a beloved child of God.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), (1303), 4.15.1.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, Thanksgiving over the Water, 306.

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> This isn't a perfectly exact quote. I don't have the book at hand right now. Ibid.