

First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord—Year C

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Well, here we are. **2022** starting pretty much where **2021 ended**, *and* where **2021 began**.

Omicron is the household word right now. It seems to be **everywhere**. I feel for **parents of school-age children** right now or **any educator at any level—the decision-trees**, oh my goodness. Store shelves are **empty of tests**. On **Thursday**, someone at our **Health Department** told me that they had **3-day’s supply of tests—the line was 2 hours long**. **People in our St. Luke’s community have it**, and some have expressed that they feel like they have **leprosy**.

Let’s take any shame about getting sick with COVID off the table. It’s a virus; it’s **morally neutral**. If we’re **committed to a life of compassion**, and **do our best to withhold judgment in so many areas of life**, then there is **no reason that we should exercise judgment when someone gets sick, whether they’ve taken every precaution they could or taken no precautions at all**. **Let’s extend love, and care, and concern, and our very best prayers for healing as we support people through this experience**.

And, this week marked the **one-year anniversary of the violent events at the Capitol on January 6th last year as Congress gathered to certify the 2020 Presidential election results**. I’ll be honest, my brain has been really, really full lately, and **I don’t even know how to process what happened a year ago**. I think I’m **still sifting through it**. I’ve mostly stayed away from the news coverage this week, *even while I remain committed to continuing to reflect on what happened, what led up to it, and where that energy has gone since*.

If you, too, are struggling, and still don’t quite know what to do with it, **be gentle with yourself—our brains and psyches and spirits and bodies can only comprehend so much** in any given moment, and **understanding what happened then and what is happening now will take time**. What matters is that we **keep sifting and reflecting, trying to understand the “dividing walls [of] hostility between us,”** to use a phrase from **Ephesians**.

Whether it’s COVID, or January 6th, or the plethora of problems plaguing our world right now, let alone the groanings of mother earth herself, it’s a lot.

And so it was 2,000 years ago. This isn’t our first rodeo as the **people of God**. **First century Palestine** was a mess—**oppressive powers reigned; people had no hope; they were looking for any light to guide them**. **With expectation and questions in their hearts, they looked to John**. Crazy though **his proclamations** where out in that wilderness, **might he be such a light?**

John knew he wasn’t the one. **He could baptize with water, but he could only do so much, but there was One coming who would do much, much more, including using a winnowing fork to separate wheat from chaff and getting that chaff into the unquenchable fire so that all that would remain would be that which is good and lifegiving**. None of us likes to go through a **refining process** where **things are being shaken loose from us, even things that aren’t good for us**, but that’s part of what

Jesus comes to do. *But it's not just to strip us down to leave us bare, but it's a stripping down to set us free.*

What's interesting is that *Jesus was in that crowd*. And in Luke's version, **he's baptized along with all the other people who were gathered out in that wilderness**. Then an amazing thing happened—when Jesus...had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

So, let's be crystal clear, **the One who will be taking a winnowing fork to *our* hearts and souls and minds and spirits and bodies, the One who will be separating the wheat from the chaff *in us* is *first and foremost* Beloved. *Love is his source*. God delights in his very Being. *Jesus has done nothing to deserve such acceptance and love and pleasedness on God's part*; it is way deeper than that—**God understands that Jesus is of the same essence as God—God's Son—and when God looks at Jesus, God sees God looking right back into God's Divine eyes, and *the same is true of us who are baptized into this love affair*. *The One winnowing us is born of Love; we are safe in his hands.*****

Our lesson from Isaiah also gives us such **ground for hope** today, **hope we desperately need**.

Thus says the LORD,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Because you are precious in my sight,

and honored, and I love you,

I give [so much] in return for you,

[so much] in exchange for your life.

Do not fear, for I am with you;

bring my sons from far away

and my daughters from the end of the earth—

everyone who is called by my name,

whom I created for my glory,

whom I formed and made."

It's not that floods and storms and fires won't come; they do, as we know all too well—**literal floods and storms and fires**, as we have seen in recent weeks, and **metaphorical ones** that are **raging across the world and our nation and our local communities**, from the **collective and societal** right on down to the **deeply personal and individual**. *But we don't have to fear—God will be with us; these things won't overwhelm us*; we may feel their heat, *but they won't burn us and consume us*.

I do wonder how those who have **lost someone in the storms or lost their home in the fires** hear this **scripture**, *but even here, amidst horrific loss*, that line from the **Burial Office** calls us to a **deeper place than most of us are prepared to go until life takes you there**—“*Therefore, whether we live or whether we die, we are Lord’s possession,*” forever and always.

It’s not that floods and storms and fires won’t come; they will, but we don’t have to fear. God is Lord and Savior; Jesus is Lord and Savior; the One whose way we follow is also the One who seeks our healing and wholeness—we are in safe hands. We have been called; we have been created for God’s glory; God formed us and made us—we have a solid place to stand and from which to move out and engage the world fraught though it is.

2022 is off to a rough start, and we need to **fill our tank deeply right from the get-go**. In short course, Jesus will turn to his mission; and goodness knows, there is **plenty of work waiting for us in this new year** as we seek to live out our baptismal vows in this broken world, *but today*, we go down into the waters and soak in just how deeply Beloved we are and the delightful truth that God is well-pleased with us. *Don’t take one more step into this new year without anchoring yourself in this space first*. This wellspring of Love is the Source from which all else flows; it is our beginning and our end; we need not fear *anything*; these waters hold all the courage we’ll need to meet whatever lies ahead. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
January 9, 2022