

¹ But now 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. ² 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. ³ For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶ I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In this passage Luke carefully distinguishes the ministries of John and Jesus. Using the crowd as a foil Luke raises the issue of who is the Messiah, God's chosen One. John makes clear the difference in authority and power between him and Jesus, especially in terms of baptism and the gift of the Spirit. It is in Christ's baptism that we see and hear God's affirmation of John's word – the Holy Spirit falls upon Jesus Christ and a voice from heaven proclaims 'You are my Son...'

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² 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."

Special Music

"Just a Closer Walk with Thee"

arr. Phillip Keveren

Sermon

Named and Claimed

This past week I attended a meeting of designated. Like most gatherings the host asked each of us to say who we are. And without a beat, each one of us gave our name and said, "I am the pastor of ... church." Now did that answer the question 'who are you?' Barely. It takes a lot more than a title or a position to express who you are. So, tell me - Who are you? The answer to that question is worth knowing, and I do not mean just a casual way. To know who you, who you really are, is a truth worth knowing.

That is the point of today's Scripture. In effect, today's gospel readings is an introduction of Jesus Christ. The crowd who came to John were truly excited by all that was happening around him. So excited, in fact, that they were wondering just who John is. Certainly, they knew some things about him. They knew his name, they knew his words, they knew his work. But they did not know his claim. Just who was John? Was he a teacher, a prophet, or something more? Might he be the Promised One, God's Messiah? Who he was would make a world of difference to them, because if

he was the Messiah then receiving his baptism would give them the surety of God's blessing. John's claim would put his work in perspective and give it its due authority and power.

John does not hesitate to reply to the crowds' questions, or their hopes. He lets them know that as good as his words are, as good as his baptism is, it is not all there is. He is not the Chosen One of God. In fact, he sees himself as less than a slave compared to the One through whom God will send. The Messiah will do more, give more and accomplish more, because he is more. The Messiah will have all God's power, and he will pour out, not water, but the Spirit and fire. He will clear and cleanse, reap and harvest. His coming will be the good news of God's salvation, which Israel had anticipated for generations.

So, when Jesus came among the crowd, when he was baptized in the waters of the Jordan, and as he bowed before God in prayer, God sent his full anointing on Jesus. Heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit fell upon him. God spoke the word of affirmation. God named him and claimed him – "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." That was the introduction of Jesus to the world. Unmistakable and undeniable. Here was God's chosen One. And that choice was more than just a nice word and a pat on the head. You are my Son, the Beloved, and you have been empowered by the Holy Spirit, for my work of salvation.

That was the foundation of Christ's life and ministry. It was central to the gospel, decisive in the book of Acts, and essential to the life of the church in every generation. In our baptism (if it is more than a little water), we are named as God's own beloved child. That is God's claim, and that is God's gift. That was the 'something more' John anticipated - the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all who believe. Without the Spirit no amount of water can cleanse our soul, no amount of seeking will provide a word, and no amount of desire will produce the life of God. But through Christ, and through His Spirit, we are made children of God (Romans 8, 14-17).

Jesus' baptism was more than a rite, more than a name. It was God's anointing of Jesus, the empowerment of the Spirit as the Christ, the Servant of God. And the Holy Spirit is God's anointing on us, as brothers and sisters of Christ, that we may be empowered to be his servants today. For each of us, through the one who 'baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and fire', we are named, claimed and empowered as God's own, for God's purposes in service of God's reign of Shalom, wholeness for us and for all the world. We cannot do that on our own power, by our own wisdom, or by our own will. What we can do is what Jesus did. We can gather with those eagerly seek God's promise, turn to God in the waters of repentance, open ourselves to God in prayer, and embrace God's name and claim, gift and call. If we dare. Do you? Amen.

***Hymn**

What Was Your Vow and Vision

CH 177 insert

Joys and Concerns

Prayers of the People

Wondrous God, we thank you for the amazing gift of your love and grace. You have named us as your children and claimed us for service. We thank you for coming to us in Jesus Christ; we thank you for his openness to your purpose - his willingness to serve you and his commitment to redeem us. We thank you for the promises of our baptism, and for the opportunity to live out our baptism

by the gift of your Spirit. We seek to live in the truth and power of your gift to us and so we come to you again in the spirit of prayer.

We pray for your church and for this congregation. Grant us joy in the knowledge that we are your people, and renew us again with your Spirit, that we may grasp your will for us - in service to your world and for the glory of Christ.

We pray for the world and all our leaders. May they recognize your call to them, and labor faithfully for your ways of justice and peace among the nations. We pray also for all who seek your mercy today. Grant your healing to the ill, your comfort to the sorrowful, and your aid to the needy. We especially remember.... and we thank you for...

We praise you, faithful God, for all your goodness to us through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

Choral Response

Remember Me

Offering

God has called us by name that we may know his grace. God has empowered us with his Spirit that we may offer our best in worship and service. With hope, we offer our gifts and our lives, that they may be a blessing to all God's children. Let us dedicate our offerings in faith.

For claiming us and gifting us, we give you thanks, O God. May our offerings honor you. May our lives reflect your lovingkindness. May our hands share with others the blessings we have received. Use them and us to your glory. Amen.

Doxology

(choose the one that is best for your faith)

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise him all creatures here below,
praise him above ye heavenly hosts, praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise God all creatures here below
Praise God for all that Love has done; Creator, Christ and Spirit One. Amen

*** Hymn**

Go, My Children

NCH 82

***Common Commission**

Let us go forth into the world in peace, being of good courage, holding fast to that which is good, rendering to no one evil for evil, strengthening the faint-hearted, supporting the weak, helping the afflicted, honoring all persons, loving and serving the Lord, and rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

*** Benediction**

Go now into the world

And may God give you complete knowledge of his will with all the wisdom and understanding which the Spirit gives; so that you might live in a way that honors and pleases God in all things.
Colossians 1:9b-10 adj.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

Postlude

“Auld Lang Syne”

Scottish traditional. Arranged D. W.

music provided by Chris Harris