

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
January 10, 2021, The Baptism of the Lord
 Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11
“I Am Baptized!”

In just a few short weeks we have moved from Christmas presents under Christmas trees,
 to opening Christmas presents,
 to putting away of all things Christmas...
 or at least plans for the putting away of all things Christmas.

And now here on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday we are opening another gift. It is a family
 gift, given to each one of us.

Some of us received this gift when we were too young to remember because our parents, or
 our grandparents, wanted us to have it,
 and so we hear the stories, or we look at the pictures
 and that's how we know about our baptism.

Some of us chose to receive this family gift as teenagers or as adults
 and we can tell the story of our baptism
 and what it felt like when we said yes to being followers of Jesus
 We can remember what it felt like when the water ran from the minister's hand
 onto our heads,
 or we remember the sensation of going under the water in the baptismal
 pool,
 or the waters in a river or lake,
 and what it felt like to come up out of that water.

In our baptisms we are given a gift. And whether we received the gift before we even had
 words for what was happening, or we received the gift when we were teenagers or adults, it is a
 lifetime gift.

There is a difference between the gifts of Christmas and the gifts of our baptism.
 You can only open a Christmas present once, and then you know what's inside.
 It doesn't do any good to wrap it up and open it over and over again.
 It's always going to be the same present.
 The gift of our baptism is different. It is a gift that can be opened over and over again.
 The gift of baptism can't wear out, it can't break, it can't get dusty on a shelf and be forgotten,
 and it can't get lost in a move, or be outgrown.
 The gift of baptism is a forever gift.
 We will spend our entire lives opening this present again and again,
 and it will always have something new for us to discover,
 it will bring us peace and comfort and God's love

in new and familiar ways, all the days of our lives.

When you are baptized you are receiving grace and love that is especially for you.
 Grace means you didn't deserve this gift,
 you didn't work for this gift,
 there's nothing you could do to earn this gift,
 it is the gift of God's love given to you,
 especially created for you,
 because God loves you completely.

This week someone sent me a wonderful meme that reads:
*"How cool is it that the same God who created mountains and oceans and galaxies
 looked at you and thought the world needed one of you, too."*
 I'd like to add to the meme and say: and how cool is it that the God who created you,
 gives you unconditional, unceasing love every single day!

Baptism is the gift of being welcomed into the family of God, and being named as God's child.
 When you are baptized you become part of a really big, universal family filled with all the children of
 God.

Our Book of Common Worship puts it this way:
 "Through the waters of Baptism,
 we participate in Christ's death and resurrection
 by which we die to all that separates us from God
 and are raised to new life in Christ.
 In Baptism we are assured of cleansing from sin,
 of inclusion in God's grace and covenant,
 and of the gift of the Holy Spirit."

We have received a gift for our hearts and for our lives:
 In baptism we see in the simple gift of water,
 that everything that separates us from God is washed away;
 sin and brokenness and the power of death are washed away in our baptisms.
 We go into the waters of baptism as infants, as teens, and as adults,
 and come out of those waters as new people, children in the family of God,
 completely loved because the gifts of baptism are based on God,
 and God loves us.

Jesus came up out of the waters of baptism, the heavens were torn open and the Holy Spirit
 descended on him like a dove, and he heard God speaking from heaven.
 "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

When we come out of the waters of baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to us,
 and the same words are said to us by our God: "you are my child, my beloved, with you I am well
 pleased."

It isn't just in that moment of baptism that God calls us a beloved child of God.
This isn't a one-time present.

Every time we remember our baptism, we are invited to remember again that we are God's beloved son or God's beloved daughter and through the Holy Spirit God has made God's home in our hearts.

It is a gift of grace and love given to us for all time.

This loving good news is a present to be opened again and again throughout our lives.
We are loved by God,
we are claimed as God's children,
we are named beloved daughter, beloved son,
God's Holy Spirit lives in our hearts
and nothing can ever take that gift away from us.
Nothing can ever take away the gifts of God's love and God's grace.

I was in college when I first heard about the 16th century reformer Martin Luther and his cry of faith: "I am baptized." He was a man who wrestled a lot with his own faith. He wrestled with great struggles with the Christian church, great struggles with his faith, he battled with depression and uncertainty.

The story is told that whenever he wrestled with these things he would walk around saying out loud:

"I am baptized." "I am baptized." "I am baptized."

It was just this week that I read someone pointing out that Martin Luther didn't say "I was baptized." He said "I am baptized," because the gifts of our baptism are for all of life.

There was a woman in the first church I served who had suffered great violence growing up in her family. As she worked to heal from her past there were times she was overwhelmed by the old voices and crushing memories of her childhood.

When she learned about what Martin Luther used to do, she found great comfort in walking around her apartment, saying out loud: "I am baptized, I am baptized."

She said it reminded her that God's love was bigger and stronger than her family's abuse.
It reminded her that God's love was for her, and nothing could take that love away;
she was a child of God.

Maybe now more than ever we need to be reminded of the gift of our baptism in our life.
These are days for us to keep opening this gift that has our name on it:
in the midst of a devastating world pandemic,
in the presence of the violence and insurrection we saw at the Capitol on Wednesday,
in the midst of our great political and racial divides,
in the midst of whatever it is that breaks your heart in these days,
or whatever challenges you,
or whatever scares you,
or whatever grieves you,

or keeps you up at night,

let us join Martin Luther with the greater truth in our lives: "I am baptized."

We are claimed by grace,

we are washed free of all that separates us from God,

we are named as God's beloved children,

God's Holy Spirit lives in our hearts,

and we belong to the family of faith.

Because of God's love, this can never be taken away from us.

Because of God's love, this is a gift we can open every day of our lives.

Because of God's love, we can say with confidence and with joy:

"I am baptized!"