

Scripture Readings and Sermon

January 9, 2022 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Isaiah 43:1-7

Since Isaiah is such a long book, it is helpful to think of Isaiah as a grand play which is broken down into three major acts. Act One describes the reason for God's punishment that eventually leads to the Babylonian captivity. The first Act ends with Chapter 35 where God promises to bring the people back. Chapters 36 thru 39 is an intermission taken from 2 Kings 18 thru 20. Act Two (Chapters 40 thru 55) assumes that the people have served their time in exile and God is calling them back home. In stark contrast to the voice of judgment in Act One, God calls to his people with compassion. The final Act (Chapters 56 thru 66) is a warning to those who have returned to remember the sins and punishments in Act One so that they will not be repeated. The text today comes from Act Two where God is calling those in exile to return home. No matter where the people find themselves (north, south, east or west) and no matter what obstacles the people may face (water or fire), God will bring them home.

Isaiah 43:1 Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

When did God call you - redeem you?

Was it when you were an adult or child?

What about Jeremiah whom God says was called when he was being formed in the womb?

If Jesus redeems at the cross, were you not already His before you were born?

Is this why we baptize infants as a sign of God's call before they can even respond?

What does it mean to you that you have always been a child of God?

Commentary on Luke 3:15-22

The story of Jesus' baptism in Luke differs significantly from the other three Gospels. The Gospel of Mark simply says that Jesus was baptized by John and the Gospel of Matthew has Jesus and John debating if Jesus even needs to be baptized. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist boldly proclaims that Jesus is the "Lamb of God". But in Luke, John is arrested before Jesus' baptism. Some scholars believe that Luke's story of John leaping in the womb replaces this meeting at the Jordan. Other scholars point out that the disciples of John were competing with the disciples of Jesus. One of the claims for John's superiority was the baptism of Jesus by John. Luke removes this claim by simply taking John out of the narrative. John's absence also explains the later request by John in Chapter 7 to ask if Jesus is the Messiah (The John who proclaimed Jesus "the Lamb of God" or the one who humbled himself before Jesus would have already known). Luke is also unique in that God's message that Jesus is the Beloved is in response to prayer and not the baptism.

Luke 3:16 He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

What is the baptism of the Holy Spirit?

How is it different than water baptism?

If baptism is a sign of that we are children of God, then what is confirmation?

Could confirmation be when we say yes to a life in the Spirit?

Does confirmation automatically bring the Spirit or does it simply mark the beginning?

How does the gift at Pentecost and Jesus' discussion in John 3 shape your understanding?

Commentary on Acts 8:14-17

After Stephen's arrest and death in Chapters 6 and 7, the Gospel begins to move beyond Jerusalem. Philip begins to successfully preach and heal in Samaria, north of Jerusalem. At that time, Samaritans were not considered Gentiles or Jews but rather part of the lost tribe of Israel that had been corrupted by the Gentiles. The extent of this corruption is exemplified in Simon the "Magician". The

conversion of Simon and Philip's later conversion of the Ethiopian Jew indicate the first step toward a mission to the Gentiles. The anointing of the Holy Spirit by the apostles Peter and John illustrates that Pentecost is now spreading to all believers. These events will set the stage for Paul's ministry to the Gentiles and Peter's anointing of Cornelius, a Gentile.

Acts 8:15 The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit

17 Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Did you notice the two stages of receiving the Spirit?

Could the anointing of the Spirit be a response to prayer and not ritual?

Does the laying on of hands come before prayer or as a response to prayer?

What if anointing is prompted by the Spirit rather than a planned ritual?

Does this understanding of a Spirit driven act fit better with Pentecost and John 3?

When has the Spirit prompted you to lay hands on someone? What happened?

Reflection on Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22, Acts 8:14-17

Sermon “What is Baptism, Confirmation, and the Laying on of Hands”

The second Sunday of every year is the baptism of Jesus. This story which varies slightly is included in all four gospels indicating its importance to early believers. Even in Jesus' day, the ritual cleansing called “mikvah” in Hebrew and baptism in Greek had a double meaning. The law required a mikvah to mark a significant life moment such as a wedding or entering the priesthood which is why most believed Jesus was baptized. It also was an outward sign of repentance and cleansing from sin which is what John was preaching explaining the one account of John refusing to baptize Jesus since Jesus is sinless.

In the early church, baptism became a sign of a new life in Christ associated with death and resurrection as well as a replacement from circumcision indicating a person's place in the family of God through Jesus. For new converts, the image of new life became very important but, as these converts began to have families, the use of baptism as a replacement for circumcision grew in importance. These two understandings can be seen in believers and infant baptism today. After the time of Roman persecutions of the Christian church, many pushed for a re-baptism of those who yielded to pressure. The early theologian Augustine argued that baptism is not some magical act of the church but a gift of God's grace. For Augustine, the idea of re-baptism negated the power of God's grace and made baptism dependent upon human works rather than God's grace.

John Wesley viewed baptism as a sign of God's prevenient grace. As Isaiah states, we are redeemed and claimed by God. Accepting the argument made by Arminius of the Netherlands, Wesley viewed Jesus' death and resurrection as the redemption of all following generations who by faith accepted Jesus. Jesus redeems and God claims everyone God's children before they are even born. This redemption and claim on everyone through the gift of Jesus is prevenient grace. When that grace is accepted is the moment of justifying grace. Baptism, as a sacrament (outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace), is a sign of God's prevenient grace working in the life of the infant.

When the child is ready to accept that gift of redemption, the church often uses the rite of confirmation but others wait until they have an “Aldergate experience” of being born again. For those who have already been baptized, they will often have a remembrance of baptism during which members experience a laying on of hands. Like Peter and John, the church using this laying on of hands not to “channel” the Spirit like a magic act but rather as an outward sign affirming the work the Holy Spirit has done in the life of the individual.

If all of this seems somewhat confusing, you are not alone. Every denomination, church, and minister has a little different understanding of what goes on during baptism, confirmation, and laying on of hands. The important thing to remember is this: you are a child of Father, redeemed by Jesus, filled with the Spirit, and proclaimed by God “Beloved”.