

“Baptized by the Spirit: Love, Joy, Peace”
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
January 13, 2019
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

This Sunday celebrates the baptism of Jesus. But we are also thinking about our “star words” and what they mean to us. Baptism is about identification. About ten years ago we had two dogs, litter mates, sisters—Fauna and Flora. They looked a lot alike but they were very different from one another. One of the difference I discovered when I was out walking them in the woods one night. I had both dogs on their leashes, but holding both leashes in the same hand. We weren't very far from our house, just a few yards, when we startled a deer at the edge of our woods. Both dogs barked and immediately leaped at the deer. I was so surprised that I tripped and fell and dropped both leashes. As soon as they were out of my grip, both dogs turned around and saw me on the ground. That's where they differed. Fauna immediately came back to me and hovered over me to see if I was all right. Flora, on the other hand, bolted for the woods as fast as she could. I got Fauna inside and then went looking for Flora. Walking through the woods and then driving the streets calling her name, all to no avail. And feeling like an idiot, because since she had never been off her leash before, barely out of our yard before, I had not gotten her any ID tags. Here was a dog running around the woods, with no tag, no ID, no way for anyone to know where she belonged. We got her back the next day when a neighbor the next street over called our house and said, “Don't you guys have boxers?” She had spent the night with them, cozy as could be.

We still have two boxers, and they still don't have ID tags on their collars, but they have the implant. Do you have those for your dog? They are a little microchip that is planted under the skin, and then any vet to whom they are taken if they are lost can scan the dog and their information will come up. They have something planted in them that forever identifies whose they are.

Baptism is about identification. When we are baptized we are marked as belonging to Christ. But like my dogs with the chip, you can't tell just by looking can you? You can't tell who is baptized and who

isn't. You can't tell in whom the Spirit is working just by how they look or how they act, can you? Or can you? We talked last week a little bit about the fruits of the Spirit. These are the nine things that St. Paul lists as qualities that should be growing in the lives of every disciple, of everyone who is baptized and claimed by Christ. But like you chose your star, you have to choose to have these fruit, don't you? Have you been thinking about the one you chose? We're going to be talking the next few weeks about those fruit and how they grow in our lives. Today we are going to look at the first three: love, joy, peace.

These are things that all of us want, right? They are things that we strive for, that we try to acquire. But I guess one of my questions is today, are they things we can acquire? Are they goals or accomplishments? Can you earn love? Can you get joy? Can you purchase peace? Perhaps they are each more gift than possession. And we should realize too that none of these things are individual things. They come when we are in relationship and perhaps only then. With God and with each other. Love is the first one. Of course it is. Some of you picked love. If you did, you may have thought to yourself, of course, how obvious. But also, how hard. Because the Greek word for love here is *agape*. And that is something we don't see too much. As Frederick Buechner says, "The love for equals is a human thing--of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles. The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing--the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing--to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints. And then there is the love for the enemy--love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world."¹

This is *agape* love. This is the love with which Christ loves us. It is the love for which we are called to

1 Buechner, Frederick. *Listening to Your Life*. pp. 302-3.

love each other. It is the love with which we are called to love the stranger, even the enemy. There is nothing harder we could have chosen or that could have chosen us. And in a way this is our ID tag, isn't it. They will know we are Christians by our love. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, Jesus says, if you have love for one another.

But shouldn't joy also be the sign, the hallmark of the Christian life? Did any of you choose joy? Joy is different because in a way it is not something you do, but something you have, or something that happens to you. Every one of us has had moments of joy in our lives. Unfortunately, we don't tend to think of these as religious moments. We think of religion and we think of ourselves as God's frozen chosen and we don't think of religion as joyous. We think of sitting in hard backed wooden pews and singing centuries old hymns that have nothing to do with us, listening to a scripture reading that is even old that we really don't understand. What's joyous about that? Joy is laughter and running and embracing and encountering such beauty that it almost breaks our hearts. Again, Frederick Buechner says:

We need to be reminded that at its heart Christianity is joy and that laughter and freedom and the reaching out of arms are the essence of it. We need to be reminded too that joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is man-made—a happy home, a happy marriage, a happy relationship with our friends and within our jobs. We work for these things, and if we are careful and wise and lucky, we can usually achieve them. Happiness is one of the highest achievements of which we are capable, and when it is ours, we take credit for it, and properly so. But we never take credit for our moments of joy because we know that they are not man-made and that we are never really responsible for them. They come when they come. They are always sudden and quick and unrepeatable. The unspeakable joy sometimes of just being alive. The miracle sometimes of being just who we are with the blue sky and the green grass, the faces of our friends and the waves of the ocean, being just what they are. The joy of release, of being suddenly well when before we were sick, of being forgiven when before we were ashamed and afraid, of finding ourselves loved when we were lost and alone. The joy of love, which is the joy of the flesh as well as the spirit. But each of us can supply his own moments, so just two more things. One is that joy is always all-encompassing; there is nothing of us left over to hate with or to be afraid with, to feel guilty with or to be selfish about. Joy is where the whole being is pointed in one direction, and it is something that by its nature a man never hoards but always wants to share. The second thing is that joy is a mystery because it can happen anywhere, anytime, even under the most unpromising circumstances, even in the midst of suffering, with tears in its eyes. Even nailed to a tree.²

2 Buechner, Frederick. *The Hungering Dark*.

The Greek word for joy is *chara*, but often in the New Testament it comes to us as *sunchara*, because *sun* means “together,” rejoice together. Joy is never complete when it is alone. As God’s chosen ones, as God’s baptized ones, we grow in the realization that we are made for joy. And even church can become a place of great laughter, of the blessedness of tears, of the amazement of moments of grace, of the embrace of a friend, of the forgiveness of an adversary, as we grow in Christ, so do our moments of joy.

Peace. Did any of you get peace? That was my word. I’m not sure I quite know what to do with it yet. Peace. It sounds wonderful. Does it mean I should be calm, never getting upset, that I should have this placid exterior so that everyone says about me, “what a peaceful guy?” Maybe, but that sounds a little boring. Maybe it means that I should never get in any arguments, that I should always give in and let others have their way. Well, that sounds not only boring, it sounds wimpy. I don’t think that’s what St. Paul meant by peace, I don’t think that’s what Jesus meant. The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*, and it doesn’t mean an absence of conflict, although these days most of us would settle for that. Shalom means fullness, or wholeness. It means being complete, having everything you need to be completely and joyfully yourself. Think of being made whole, of being broken but put back together even stronger and better. That’s shalom, that’s peace. So how will I think of peace this year? How will you? Will we look at our lives, especially at our relationships with God, with our spouses, our families, our church, our community, and ask, “What needs to happen for this to be made better, to be made whole, to experience shalom? What can I do to bring strength and healing and peace to this relationship?” Every week, we reach out for each other’s hand and say, “Peace be with you.” We “pass the peace.” Peace isn’t just a calmness you feel inside at the end of the day. It’s building up our relationships because we know that as Isaiah says, we are family brought together from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by God’s name. Peace is coming together.

Love, Joy, Peace. Peace like a river. Joy like a fountain. Love like an ocean. May we choose them,

today. Each day. In my soul. And in our church. And in our world.