

1.12.25 ~ Epiphany 1
“God’s Divine Appointment”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Isaiah 43:1-7 ^{NIV}

¹ But now, this is what the Lord says—
 he who created you, Jacob,
 he who formed you, Israel:
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
 I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
² When you pass through the waters,
 I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
 they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
 you will not be burned;
 the flames will not set you ablaze.
³ For I am the Lord your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
 Cush and Seba in your stead.
⁴ Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
 and because I love you,
I will give people in exchange for you,
 nations in exchange for your life.
⁵ Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
 I will bring your children from the east
 and gather you from the west.
⁶ I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’
 and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’
Bring my sons from afar
 and my daughters from the ends of the earth—
⁷ everyone who is called by my name,
 whom I created for my glory,
 whom I formed and made.”

Leader: These Words of Prophecy Are from God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 ^{GNT}

¹⁵ People's hopes began to rise, and they began to wonder whether John perhaps might be the Messiah. ¹⁶ So John said to all of them, “I baptize you with water, but someone is coming who is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ He has his winnowing shovel with him, to thresh out all the grain and gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out.”

The Baptism of Jesus

²¹ After all the people had been baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit came down upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you.”

Leader: Luke’s Account of John and Jesus Is from God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Beloved Lord, we are here this second Sunday of a new calendar year grateful for the Christmas and New Year’s holidays, relationships and intentions renewed, and for our safety in the snow and freezing temperatures. We worship you today and surrender to you the distracting things on our minds, so that you can fill our hearts and minds with your words and guidance. Life’s news and circumstances sadden and disorient us so we need your strength and encouragement. Focus our minds so that we may hear your voice in this message. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Thank you for being here today! You may recall in early January 2019 when I was preparing my trial sermon in view of a call to this church, it snowed, and we had to cancel church on the 13th! The following Sunday, I preached, you voted, and here I am. So, in 2025, 6 years later, I was determined we would have church today! And I am glad that I did not yield any negative power to that cancellation but saw it as a holy opportunity to catch my breath. Today’s passages speak about divine signs, so let’s “dig in.” Pun intended since Charles is out today!

During the Advent and Christmas seasons, we talked about God’s messengers preparing us to greet the Christ Child who was the Messiah. Well, today, we meet again the prophet Isaiah and hear the voice of God in the heavens at Jesus’ baptism. More messengers confirm the incarnate Jesus’ purpose on earth.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims, “Fear Not!” Didn’t we hear that from multiple angels and heavenly hosts as they announced the Christ child would be born to Mary in Bethlehem? Well, the context is different, but

the poem is meant to give strength to its hearers in captivity. The prophet gives his people multiple examples of God's love and deliverance. That is one reason I love the book of Isaiah – there are many encouraging passages! One historical event is the Exodus from Egypt; he reminds them how God promised and delivered them to the land of milk and honey. The other is the dispersion of Israel to Babylon. God promised to deliver his people from exile because he loves Israel, his chosen land and people. "I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior and Redeemer." This is where history and prophecy meet; the Lord gave Egypt, Nubia, Seba, and Ethiopia to others in exchange for his sovereign people. Why because he loved them, flaws, and all. They eventually went back home.

This passage is an oracle of salvation; he addresses them as his covenant people. He would save them not for their own benefit, but to allow the nations to see God's work and glory. This is one of the prophetic voices preparing God's people for the Messiah to come, and it applies today.

During Advent we introduced John the Baptist as one of the important messengers, first in the womb and again in the wilderness. Now we focus on his relationship with Jesus. All four Gospels record Jesus' baptism and the eyewitnesses, though different accounts. John baptized with water, but the Messiah baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. This supernatural image points directly to God's purpose for sending Jesus. So why would he need a baptism if he had no sin? One theory is that because John and Jesus were cousins, Jesus came to the wilderness to support John's ministry. Some say John was in prison at that time. The main

purpose of Jesus' baptism was more of an anointing with Spirit to authenticate and begin his mission and ministry. It was a ritual similar to the laying on of hands for an ordination, not one of repentance. Another theory is that because of his leadership, Jesus saw the need to save the sinful nations and so was baptized to release **their** sins.

But baptism for anyone is very personal. Jesus prayed right before the baptism as we do today; that's when the heavens opened up illustrating God breaking into human history with the revelation that Jesus was God's most beloved son and our Messiah: "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." The dove is a symbol of peace or freedom and conveys the idea that Jesus would bring peace and freedom to the captives and to all believers. This is the connection between the Isaiah passage and Luke's account. The dove sighting was the first of several supernatural experiences that Jesus has that are recorded: his mother Mary, his father Joseph, the shepherds, and the wise men were all visited by angels speaking the words of God. Jesus conducted many healings that transformed sinful men to believers. Jesus and his special disciples experienced the Transfiguration, another supernatural message. Peter walked on the water not on his own power, but from his belief in Christ. The inexplicable and supernatural resurrection was witnessed by his disciples. So why question the dove descending on him in the baptismal waters? The Jordan River is flanked by beautiful trees and yes, it could have been a real bird, but all four Gospels tell the same story of the dove of peace, freedom, and justice. Not just the dove, but the voice of God in Luke "certified" (*if you will*) Jesus as his son, as Isaiah prophesied in

Chapter 42:1: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.”

In Luke, we read how John’s disciples out of fear of judgment were baptized with water to symbolically and physically wash away sin. This cleansing was part of Jewish tradition anyway. But Jesus’ ministry was more loving and compassionate. His was not a ministry of fear and punishment, but of healing, miracles, and love. Jesus built a fellowship of believers and taught his disciples the word of God. Through his teachings and personal example, their salvation and ours was one of gradual transformation of the heart. While God divinely called both men to preach and teach, Jesus was divinely **appointed** in his role as Son of God and Son of Man to come to earth as God incarnate himself. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1 ^{NIV}).” Can there be any doubt?

A last thought about Jesus’ baptism. In his humanity, I imagine the weight of his peoples’ sins and situations led him to pray for their protection and salvation. I believe he also prayed to his heavenly father for himself and for the future strength he would need to carry on his ministry and to bear the many burdens and consequences of their sin and ours. So, I ask you to ponder as we go further into the new year: what does your baptism mean to you? How are you living it out? How are you sharing your faith with others? Are you sharing your faith with others? The prayer Jesus prayed before his baptism was one of “*vital hospitality*” for those he would encounter in the future, asking God to forgive their sins and welcome them into fellowship. Remember your baptism; share your faith. You too are divinely called. Have you chosen your word yet?

Christ is with us, Emmanuel! Christ will come again in glory! Amen?

Amen! ||

Let us pray. Loving God, we thank you today and every day for our Savior Jesus Christ. Though we are not worthy of your grace, we humbly accept it and ask your mercy. Please open our hearts personally and as a church to answer your call for 2025. May your divine guidance strengthen our own purpose, drawing us together in action. We ask you to help us share our faith with others. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.