

Scripture Reading for January 9, 2022

Isaiah 43:1-7

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, Ethiopia 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.”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. 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 barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.

Acts 8:14-17

¹⁴ When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. ¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Sermon: “Who Am I?”

What is it that Baker, Brewer, Carpenter, Cooper, Fletcher, Mason, Miller, Smith, Taylor, and Thatcher all have in common? They are – of course - among the many family names, or surnames, that identify a traditional profession. And in the past, children would follow in the family business and so these names often continued to identify a person’s work and role within the community. Things are obviously different today, yet when you go to a social gathering and strangers are engaging in introductions, one of the earliest questions we tend to ask is “what do you *do*?” And a person will respond: I am a teacher, a nurse, a student, an accountant, engineer, etc. I am not sure why we do this, because we are obviously much more than our job title, but I guess it connects us to our social stereotypes of people! Nevertheless, a person’s occupation *can* become a key feature of their *personal identity*, which is one reason why adjusting to retirement can be so hard. And this leads to my key question for today: “*Who am I?*” and our response obviously links to our identity, and to how we perceive ourselves and perhaps even our self-worth. In addition to *occupation*, we can define ourselves in numerous ways, including by our *relationships*: a husband, wife, father, mother, child, or grandparent.¹ We can also define ourselves by our *losses* too, such as divorced or widowed. And this illustrates that our identity is not fixed, as such, but changes over time and through life-changing experiences. Furthermore, we sometimes say, “he’s not himself today” as if there’s distinctive mood change that will hopefully soon correct itself. And since that usually happens, there is – thankfully - some stability to our core personality and identity too. Reliability is, after all, important for our relationships.

Where am I going with all this, you may wonder? I ask that you please be patient a little longer!

One of the things about COVID is the toll it has taken on our mental health. In some ways, this demise has stealthily crept up on us over the last two years. We have endured lock-downs, on-line education, zoom meetings, telephone appointments, social distancing, and masks. We are tired and we wonder when - and even if - it will end. And now, at the beginning of 2022, we are forced again to curtail our activities so that we don’t overwhelm our tired and over-stretched health-services. And we *will* do that, together and responsibly, but not without added stress or anxiety, and all this has a negative impact on our wellbeing. And in this fog, we can again ask, “*Who am I?*” because our very identity can feel like it’s taking a battering by job loss, working from home, and social isolation.

I now want you to conjure in your imagination a sailboat or a yacht. Now, I’m no sailor but there is something graceful and elegant in seeing a yacht in full-sail moving through the water on a summer’s day. The wind is propelling the craft, and the skipper is steering a course in the direction he or she wants to go, yet mindful of the changing winds and the need to tack in a zig-zag fashion or make course corrections on the fly. I suggest that’s a potential metaphor for life, and I invite you to explore that

¹ We can also define ourselves by our sexuality (e.g., LGBTQI) or by our age (e.g., teen, etc.) or in some other way (e.g., single parent, etc.)

picture for yourself. The winds of COVID have forced our sailboats to go in directions not envisaged or planned, and its disconcerting for us all. Now one crucial thing about a sailboat is its *keel*. This hidden, fin-like structure lies under the boat – pointing downwards. It’s *not* an anchor or something that inhibits forward progress, rather it provides vital lateral *stability* for the yacht as it moves through the water. The keel is therefore a counter-weight, more accurately a water-assisted counter-lever. Yet the keel is rarely seen,² given that it’s hidden below the waterline. And to feed your imagination, keels have various designs and shapes, yet their stabilizing function remains the same.

I want us to now link the sailboat’s keel with our *identity*, as the winds fill the sails and move the boat along. I suggest this keel is *more* than our *personality-type*, such as introvert or extrovert, and more than our *emotions*, whether we are exhilarated and joyful, or fearful and panicky. We may be prone to certain behaviors or tendencies, which then shapes our identity – but identity is more than that.³

Identity links to the “*Who am I?*” or “*What am I?*” questions. And how we answer those questions *stabilizes* us in life, grounds our existence, informs our values, shapes our social roles, and even speaks to life after death too.⁴ Last week I spoke about the identity of Jesus being revealed in his birth stories; in particular, in the account of the wise men from the East.⁵ That revelation builds on information Matthew and Luke tell us was disclosed by angels to Mary, Joseph, and John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah.⁶ We are *still* in the season of Epiphany and the mystery of Jesus’ identity is further revealed and affirmed just after Christ’s baptism by means of the divine voice from heaven that proclaimed: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”⁷ This was a moment of commissioning for ministry of the now-adult Jesus as God’s Chosen One, the Messiah. It also reveals who Jesus is *in relation* to God the Father.⁸ I have spoken on this topic before.⁹ Today I want to focus on the “*Who am I?*” question for *followers* of Jesus, people who call themselves “Christian.” Why? Because this might help us remember an important part of *our* identity, and so add to the stabilizing influence of our personal keels.¹⁰

² Unless the boat is berthed above water for the winter. Incidentally, if a keel catastrophically fails, the vessel will easily capsize. Psychologically this is the equivalent to a breakdown.

³ See also: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/>.

⁴ A person’s identity then connects with psychology, philosophy, personality, emotions . . . and belief system.

⁵ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Truth-is-Stranger-than-Fiction.pdf>.

⁶ See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Savior-Messiah-Lord.pdf>.

⁷ Luke 3:22. The Holy Spirit also descended on him (“like a dove”), so commissioning Jesus for ministry as Messiah.

⁸ See also [4] and John 1, in that the 4th Gospel also begins by defining the relationship between Jesus and God the Father.

⁹ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/By-Water-and-the-Spirit.pdf> ; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/%E2%80%9CA-Voice-Came-From-Heaven%E2%80%9D.pdf> ; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/The-Baptism-of-Jesus.pdf>.

¹⁰ The *Living Faith* document summarises it this way: “Baptism and Holy Communion are visible expressions of the Gospel given as a means of *entering* and *sustaining* the Christian Life (7.5.1).” (*Living Faith* is a ‘subordinate standard’ for the Presbyterian Church in Canada.)

Perhaps the obvious first response to the “*Who am I?*” question is to say that we too are a “child of God.” In one sense that’s true, in that we are all human beings made in God’s image¹¹ and so we are all children of God. Yet this simply differentiates us from other animals, and important though that is, there is much more to our identity as Christians. A distinctive feature of being a follower of Jesus is our *baptism*, so I want to talk about that today because Christian baptism is *not* the same as that of John the Baptist’s.

We say that baptism is a *sacrament*, which is the Latin equivalent of the Greek word *mysterion*, meaning “mystery” or “secret.” St Augustine described a sacrament as “a *visible* sign of God’s *invisible* grace.”¹² Most Protestant churches have just two sacraments, Holy Communion and Baptism, the ones Christ himself commanded his followers to do.¹³ Recall that at the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples to re-enact that feast of bread and wine in remembrance of his death.¹⁴ And Matthew tells us the risen Jesus commissioned his disciples, saying: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”¹⁵ As you can see, a feature of the sacraments is that through everyday things – bread, wine, and water – *God acts!* But let’s *not* mistake the bread, wine, and water as having some kind of magical powers - they don’t! They are, however, *more* than *symbols* and *signs* because, through the sacraments, God’s Spirit communicates *to us* and is present *with us*. The sacraments, therefore, have an emphasis on what *God has done and is doing*, together with our response. They are given to *sustain* us on our pilgrimage and *reassure* us of God’s promises. They’re therefore important!

Focusing only on baptism: Christian baptism is the sacrament of *initiation into life in Christ*.¹⁶ It marks the beginning of the journey of faith and discipline *that lasts throughout one’s life*. This then is a feature of our *identity*, defined *in relationship* to Jesus himself, and one that can help provide stability in life’s storms. There are many rich images in the New Testament for baptism and *all* of them are important.¹⁷ We are, after all, using metaphors to describe a profound mystery! I will simply mention four of them,

¹¹ Gen 1:26-27.

¹² Alternatively, “Sacraments are an outward expression of an inner reality that God has generously done.” The ultimate sacrament is, of course, the incarnation: literally, “God made flesh” in Jesus the Messiah, the one who supremely reveals God’s grace and love toward us (Col 1:26-27).

¹³ The Roman Catholic church and Eastern church have seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, ordination, marriage, and anointing of the sick (or “extreme unction”). It is *not* that Protestants dismiss the merits of the other five; it is simply their connection to Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ See Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:23-25. (Paul’s letter reveals this was indeed the *practice* of the early church - even before the Gospels were written.)

¹⁵ Matt 28:18-20a. Note this very early *trinitarian* formula in the practical life of the Church. Christ’s commission concludes: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (20b). Jesus not only commanded baptism but he himself freely submitted to being baptized by John the Baptist (Mark 1:9-11). By this act, Jesus entered into solidarity with lost (sinful) humanity, and he begins his life of costly love and service that eventually lead to his passion, death, and resurrection.

¹⁶ See 1 Cor 3:23, 6:19; 2 Cor 10:7, Gal 3:27.

¹⁷ See also the summary in *Living Faith* 7.6.

and all of them are just as relevant for us today as they were in the 1st century. Baptism is described as a *dying and rising with Christ*.¹⁸ The descent *into* water signifies the Christian's identification with Jesus' suffering and death, whereby the power of that sin has in the old way of life is broken, and the ascent *from* the water signifies participation in the new life in the Spirit based on the power of the resurrection. Baptism is also treated as a washing of the sin-stained life and God's forgiveness washes away the sin of those who truly are repentant.¹⁹ Those who are thus pardoned by Christ receive, in baptism, a fresh start in life and a new ethical orientation in God's kingdom. Baptism is also portrayed as a *rebirth* by the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Another image of baptism is a *welcome* into a new community of promise, becoming members of a new family and citizens of God's new society.²¹ This latter point is important because, for Jews, the *sign* of their mutual covenant with God is – of course - circumcision. But in the New Testament, that sign was replaced by baptism.²²

Why explain all that? First, it's good to be reminded of some of the basics of Christian faith and practice. Second, baptism has sadly become an issue that divides Christians when its intent was to promote unity, enhance faith, and celebrate God's grace! Consequently, baptism is often misunderstood or overlooked by many Christians. It can be merely seen as rite of passage that results in a certificate that we simply file away, only to magically present it to St. Peter at the pearly gates!²³ This trivializes baptism and belittles the sufferings of Jesus.

Just as the baptism of Jesus affirms *his* identity; in the similar way, our baptism both establishes and affirms *our* identity. Jesus is who God says he is. *We are* also who *God says we are*. We have been adopted into God's family and therefore God looks at us and says, "you are my *dear* child, and I am *delighted* with you." Those are powerful words of acceptance; let's be grounded and stabilized by them! Paul expresses it differently; he says that through baptism we are to be found *in* Jesus Christ.²⁴ I find it helpful to hold fast to that earlier image of dying and rising *with* Christ through the waters of baptism. That's *not* meant to be morbid or only point to life after death. Rather, it means that the same divine Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead also *lives in us* and, consequently, we are to now live *confident*

¹⁸ Rom 6:3–4; Col 2:11–13.

¹⁹ 1 Cor 6:11. Repentance (Greek *metanoia*) means changing direction, or U-turn, toward God (cf. John's baptism).

²⁰ John 3:5; Acts 2:38.

²¹ Eph 2:19; Gal 3:26–28.

²² See Col 2:11 – 13; see also Gal 3:26–29, where Paul writes: "In Christ Jesus you are *all* children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are *all one* in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." The shocking power of those inclusive words cannot be understated! They transcend the traditional barrier between Jews and non-Jews. Baptism is, therefore, the key sign of church unity within its obvious diversity of social status and ethnicity. Furthermore, just as it is nonsense to speak of being circumcised more than once, so baptism is a one-time act! As it says in Eph 4:4–6, "There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, *one baptism*; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

²³ However, it would appear that the simple act of baptism does not *guarantee* our place in heaven (see Matt 7:21–13, although I admit that Christian *liturgy* can give that impression). Consequently, some think that without baptism – whether as an infant or adult – should a person suddenly die, they won't "go to heaven." This creates fear and superstition over Christian baptism when, in fact, it's an affirmation and sign of God's love and grace, revealed in Jesus Christ.

²⁴ See [17, 18, 20, 21].

that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God.²⁵ Returning to the sailing boat analogy, we often imagine the Holy Spirit to be the God's breath or wind as the driving force of the vessel that is our lives. This image has merit, but today I want us to *internalize* the divine Spirit as living *within* us. Consequently, the Holy Spirit's presence as the one who sustains us can, I think, be linked to the yacht's keel that's largely unseen but provides vital stability. Because we can be confident of the Spirit's firm hold of us, our yacht – our very selves – can lean into the winds of life in trust.

Life always has challenges and surprises, and some people cope better with change than others. Regardless, we have all been battered by the winds of COVID in one way or another. It's draining. Without being naïve about the role of one's faith in a crisis, I ask you to reflect further on that image of a yacht's keel. What have been stabilizing influences for you? What is that enhances your joy and diminishes your fear? Hold on tight to those things.

In conclusion, our personal identity is, of course, formed by many things and shaped by many factors. But let's not forget that through baptism, we have been given the richness of the Holy Spirit in order, amongst other things, to help shape and strengthen us; he will hold us fast. Will we hold on to him? A good deal of the Christian faith is a matter of learning to live in this new reality, even when we can't see it or feel it. Our life then becomes a journey of faith in which we ever more fully enter into our identity in Jesus Christ, and we become participants in the life and love of the Trinity, in whose name we are baptized. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁵ Rom 8:37-39. The young Martin Luther had agonising doubts as to his identity as a forgiven child of God, which were eventually addressed by focusing on this profound meaning of baptism.