

# “The Ransom”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 10, 2010*

Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 43:1-7

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 3:15-22

A graduation is supposed to be a memorable occasion, and my commencement exercises from Colgate University in May of 1991 were certainly memorable, though maybe not for all the right reasons. Tradition holds that graduation takes place outdoors, weather permitting, and in upstate New York, if the temperature surpasses 60 degrees at any time during the spring semester, students can be found sunbathing on dormitory rooftops. So, barring a downpour, we are spared spending a glorious day in the hockey rink, and chairs are set up outside next to the lake.

Instead, the 700 graduates and their families were met that afternoon with record-setting temperatures, approaching 90 degrees. Sitting for several hours in the sun that day may be the single reason that I now wear a grey robe instead of a black one. I'm sure that our commencement speaker, a distinguished United States Senator, had very interesting things to say in his 45 minutes address about the ramifications of the fall of communism, but I was having some trouble concentrating.

And then, one by one, the names were read, pausing long enough for each graduate to cross the stage, receive the diploma, pause for the official picture, and hear the smattering of applause from the vast audience. Every hundred names or so, another administrator or teacher took over reading the names. We were, of course, arranged alphabetically, meaning that I would have to wait until the mid-600's for my time to cross the stage.

Finally, the time came. The reader at the time was faculty sponsor for my fraternity and I had known him for four years. So, I'm sure he didn't do it on purpose, maybe he lost his concentration; maybe it was the heat, but the moment I stepped on the stage, standing right in front of the speakers: he read from his list: "Josh Wahl."

When you read Luke's telling of the baptism of Jesus, it also seems a little bit underwhelming. It appears that Jesus was willing to stand in line with everyone else and wait for his turn. Jesus presented himself for baptism as an act of solidarity with a nation and a world full of sinners – those whom John the Baptizer had called to come out into the wilderness.

If we read carefully, we might notice that Luke says nothing about Jesus' baptism. There's nothing here about Jesus going down into the water or coming up out of the water. We probably assume that this happened as the other gospels tell the story, but Luke doesn't seem to care. Indeed, Luke doesn't seem very interested in the actual moment of baptism, only what happened after baptism.<sup>1</sup>

We're also not told of any direct encounter between Jesus and John that day; in fact, Luke makes it a point that we understand that John had been put in prison. While Jesus may be one of the crowd, Luke wants us to know that God recognizes him as being chosen, special, and beloved.

For Jesus, of course, there would be no diploma or mortar board that day. Rather, God's spirit settled upon him; it descended not just as a vision, but "in bodily form, like a dove." What could that mean? Was it a reference to Jesus himself – that, in him, God also descended in bodily form, like something very recognizable, yet somehow different? Or could it be that, like a diploma, the vision of the spirit which was given to Jesus that day by the river, was something he could always look back on; a symbol for a rite of passage into a new stage of life? Jesus had graduated from his preparatory years. Now he could go out and practice the vocation that God had in mind for him.

The voice from heaven says, "You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." These words may come from heaven but they do not come out of the blue: they echo God's words from Isaiah, read this morning, but written by the prophet long before: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine...you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you" (43:1b, 4a). God remembers us, Isaiah says. It's as if God is trying to say to each one of us, "No matter what happens and no matter how low and discouraged you feel, no matter what is happening around you and in your life, don't you *ever* let anyone tell you that you are *anything* but a *precious* and *beloved* child of God."<sup>2</sup>

The prophet Isaiah was writing to a people who were in exile. It offers a vision of re-creation; telling of the new things that God is doing for an enslaved, despairing people seemingly left for dead at the hand of their conquerors. The Israelites are reminded how, in the past, God had led them through the waters and given them a new identity – to be a covenant people; that God would never forget them, no matter where they go. Isaiah also tells them that God is willing to pay any ransom to set them free: redemption is available not only to those who have sinned, but those who have been captured in the web of the sins of others.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Lundblad, "A Baptism-Shaped Life"

<sup>2</sup> Kate Huey, "Affirmed by Love" from *Weekly Seeds*

In Hebrew tradition, to be redeemed according to the Law meant to be bought out of human bondage by a relative, someone within the extended family.<sup>3</sup> And so, when God promises to redeem Israel from its slavery to Babylon, God is asserting a close kinship, a family relationship, with them. Through deadly perils, consuming flames and rushing waters, God will always be with them; and will give sacrificially for them.

Isn't that the good news God longs for us to hear; that we are important enough to God that no price is too high to pay to have us free. For when we are free, we can enter into the relationship that God wants us to have – one of honest communication, prayer and supplication, thanksgiving and praise.

This is also the good news that we try to communicate when we pass through the waters of our own baptism. In this sacrament, we are cleansed from our sin, but we also proclaim that God has released us from the bondage of the sinfulness around us. Whether as adults or as children, we believe that those who are baptized have been re-created by God; they die in the waters and are born again. Not literally, of course, but also not just in theory. Just as the vision of the Spirit that Jesus saw was "like a dove," so also are we reborn in baptism as if we now have new parents. It is as if the voice also comes out of heaven to say to each of us at our own baptism: "you are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased."

Clarence Jordan, author of *The Cotton Patch Version* of the New Testament, offers this translation: "a voice came from the sky saying, "you are my dear Son, I'm proud of you."<sup>4</sup> The message which is being passed from heaven to earth, from God the Father to Jesus the Son on the banks of the Jordan is two-fold: first, "I love you" and second, "I am proud of you." We know the impact of that these words have on our own children, and hate to think of the consequences for children who do not hear these words. Imagine, then, the positive effect of those words on Jesus at the day of his baptism. God's love for him is thicker than any of the waters he will pass through. God's pride in him is boundless. And there is no ransom price that God will not pay to ensure his Son's freedom, even freedom from the power of sin and death.

Unlike my college graduation, I don't remember my baptism. Of course, I was only five weeks old. My father had been assigned to a Naval Base in Florida and my parents wanted all the grandparents to be able to attend. It was held at my grandparent's church, and I have a picture of all of us standing on the chancel steps. At least, I'm told it's me, because my body and face are entirely wrapped in a blanket, a small lump being held in my mother's arms.

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<sup>3</sup> Kathleen O'Conner in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 1

<sup>4</sup> As quoted by Robert Brearley in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 1

There's probably a baptismal certificate lying somewhere in the file cabinets of that church, but – like a diploma – it's not the actual piece of paper that is significant. It is the expressions of love and pride which accompany that day: parents and other family members who love you unconditionally, friends who share your experiences and affirm your accomplishments. These are the tangible, bodily signs of God's love for us – a love that wants us to be free; that is willing to pay any cost to give us that opportunity.

For those of us who are parents, the words of the voice from heaven serve as a reminder that declarations of the parents' love and affirmation of the child are vital to their development. The voice from heaven models the parental blessing. We who are made in the image of God, and whom God allows to be co-creators in the bringing forth of new generations, are obligated in return to emulate God in blessing the children God gives us.<sup>5</sup>

John the Baptizer came to prepare the way of the Lord, preaching a message of baptism for the repentance of sins, but he knew that someone greater was still to come – someone whose sandals he was not even worthy to untie; someone who could offer a new kind of baptism. In Jesus, God offered a message, “good news,” that likewise surpassed what John had been preaching: a message for everyone – including both sinners and those who have been caught in the web of sinfulness.

For the message he proclaimed, Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard; a friend of prostitutes and tax-collectors. He was not afraid to get in line with the rest of us: having already been told by his heavenly Father that he was beloved – who he hung around with could not change that; and that his Father was proud of him – he would not be judged by those around him, because God had already proven him worthy.

We are also beloved and worthy – not because of what we do or do not do; not because of who we do or do not spend time with; but because we have been redeemed by a belief in Christ. The price has already been paid; no ransom is ever too high. We don't have a diploma or certificate to show for it – and people who think they are in a position to judge might call it into question. But, the voice we hear is for us alone – the Spirit that comes is for us to see. Receive it, embrace it, for you, too, are beloved by God. AMEN.

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<sup>5</sup> *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, “Luke-John”