

**Without Condition**  
**Isaiah 43:1-7**  
**Baptism of the Lord Sunday**  
**January 12, 2025**  
**Rev. Leigh Curl-Dove**

The lectionary is often a funny thing. The revised common lectionary keeps the same pattern every three years—years A, B, and C—with scripture selections from the Hebrew Bible and the Christian testament to fit the liturgical year. Today is the Baptism of the Lord. We recognize it in the Christian calendar the Sunday after Epiphany. On Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we remember and reflect on Jesus’ baptism and in turn remember and reflect on our own baptisms.

This morning we read Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism, which is rather short but no less beautiful. Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan river. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove and God’s voice comes from the heavens saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus models baptism for us. As followers of Jesus, baptism is an outward sign of our inward decision and commitment to follow Jesus. We are plunged into the baptismal waters to be buried with Christ in baptism, and then up out of the waters we are raised to walk in the newness of life. This new life committed to following Jesus is far from easy, and we certainly won’t get it right all the time, but still God names and claims each one of us as God’s own child who is beloved beyond measure. God does this without condition. There’s nothing we can do about it. It’s just the way it is. “You are my child. You are beloved.” Full stop. No caveats. No conditions.

It’s easy to see why the creators of the lectionary paired the word of God to the people from Isaiah with Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism. Our passage from Isaiah this morning is all about God’s unconditional love, “I have called you by name, you are Mine...you are precious in My eyes, you are honored, and I love you.” God knows that a life committed to following God’s way is far from easy, but this passage in Isaiah assures its audience that God is with them no matter what, every step of the way.

When the lectionary was put together, there was no way of knowing what the world would be like in perpetuity. The revised common lectionary came out of several iterations of lectionaries, spanning decades. The revised common lectionary was released in 1994. So much has happened in our world in the 31 years since it was released—beauty and wonder, war and terror, violence and oppression, celebrations and victories, joy and hope, natural disasters and tragedy, love and laughter. All of that and more has happened in our world in the last 31 years. All of that and more lies within the words, stories, poetry, and letters of the revised common lectionary.

The lectionary is often a funny thing because this morning we hear a word from God through the prophet Isaiah, a word where God says, “Should you walk through fire, you shall not be singed, and flames shall not burn you.” That is the word God has for the people of Israel while

they are still enduring the Babylonian exile, and that is the word for us this morning while Los Angeles is burning and has been burning for most of the week.

This passage in Isaiah comes while God's people are living in exile. They have been uprooted from their homes, forced into captivity by the Babylonian empire—an exile that will last 70 years. These people know what it is to walk through fire and floods. And here, God assures them that their time of exile will come to an end. But, this word from God through the prophet comes immediately after a harsh indictment of God's people from God. God's people had fallen prey to the ways of Babylon, many were worshiping idols and straying from God's way of love and justice, of caring for their neighbors and the most vulnerable among them. God says that the people have sinned against God, the people would not walk in God's ways and would not obey God's law. God is angry with God's people, and God wants them to wake up to what they are doing. God wants them to change their ways.

In Genesis 1 when God created human beings, the first commandment God gives the humans is to be fruitful and multiply, but the second is to care for the earth and everything in it. Hear me say, these fires in Los Angeles are not divine retribution for failing to fulfill the God-given commandment to care for the earth. None of the natural disasters we've seen have been. God is not up above sending fires and floods to burn and overwhelm, but the earth is crying out. There are consequences to the years and years of mistreating, neglecting, and abusing our earth. So much has been done in the name of innovation or progress or a nation's "right to defend" itself, that our earth can't take it anymore.

The United States continues to send billions of dollars of weapons to fuel the ongoing genocide in Gaza. That is not just an assault on human lives, but it is an assault on the earth. There are no more olive trees left in Gaza. Military action, wars, around the world are literally and actively destroying the earth. What happens across the world, directly affects us right here in the United States, right here in Seattle, Washington.

I saw a post on Instagram this week from queer content creator, Matt Bernstein, detailing the cost of AI specifically in response to the fires in Los Angeles. He said, "One search on chatGPT uses 10x the amount of energy as a google search. Training one AI model produces the same amount of carbon dioxide as 300 round trip flights between New York and San Francisco and five times the lifetime emissions of a car."

This technology that many of us access with a mere click of a button not even giving a thought to what it might cost, is destroying the earth. Right here in our own city, some of the biggest output from AI is happening from companies like Amazon and Google. The Westin Building downtown is a major telecommunications hub and data center, in 25 years it is estimated that it will use up to 80 million kilowatt hours of electricity, which is equivalent to burning 65 million pounds of coal.

AI is using obscene amounts of water and energy and emitting carbon dioxide at alarming rates. We are burning astronomical amounts of coal. It's no wonder the earth is on fire and flooding

and quaking. Matt Bernstein goes on to say in his Instagram post, “We don’t need AI ‘art.’ We don’t need AI grocery lists. We don’t need AI self-driving cars. We don’t need chatGPT or gemini...or whatever ‘revolutionary’ technology already exists inside our own human brains. We need the earth.”

The word from God in our passage this morning is a word for a people living in exile. It is a word of hope and promise of coming liberation. For most of us in this room, that is not our reality. Most of us are not a people living in exile, and we will never know what it is to be forcibly uprooted from our homes. But, the words from God in this passage are still true for us. God loves us without condition. God has called us by name and called us God’s own. We are precious in God’s eyes. But, much like God’s words of indictment calling the people back to God’s way of love, back to caring for their neighbors, back to caring for the earth, God calls us to those things too. God loves us without condition but God wants more for us. God created us, God fashioned us because of and out of love to live in love, to share love to all, *all* of creation.

In verse 3 of our passage, God says, “For I am the Lord, your God,” in it you can hear the echoes of God speaking to Moses from the burning bush. When Moses asks God what he should say to the Israelites when they ask the name of the one who sent him to bring them out of Egypt, God says to Moses, “I am who I am.” This specific phrasing doesn’t just mean “I am who I am,” but it also means “I will be who I will be.”

God is God in perpetuity. God is who God is, who God has always been, and who God will always be. God has, does, and will always be present here with us on earth working in the midst of and in spite of tragedy and disaster. God has, does, and will always name us and claim us as God’s own children, as God’s own beloved. God has, does, and will always call us back to God, back to who we were created to be, back to loving and caring for our neighbors, for the most vulnerable, for the earth and everything in it.

And God has, does, and will always love us without condition.