

January 9, 2022, Baptism of Jesus Sunday
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29,
Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In It With Us

[Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus, One of Us, posted on 1-2-22 for 1-9-22, including quote from John Dominic Crossan. Desmond Tutu quote from <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/world-mourns-loss-of-archbishop-desmond-tutu> in a comment from May 2008, Geneva, Switzerland. Obituary for Rev. Lowell Erdahl: <https://www.tributearchive.com/obituaries/23403287/rev-lowell-erдах/roseville/minnesota/ohalloran-murphy-funeral-and-cremation-services>. Obituary for Susan Palo Cherwien: <https://www.startribune.com/obituaries/detail/0000412530/>]

Grace and Peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

I miss seeing you gathered in person in the sanctuary.

I miss hearing the voice of the community as we worship our gentle and powerful God.

This week, in particular, I miss witnessing the choir finally, finally able to get to work
with our new Minister of Worship and Music, Bobby RagoNANAN.

Today, though, I'm grateful for this time to worship:

for the technology that allows us this flexibility,
for the people who make this possible,
and for your patience.

While we've done this before,

we're doing it with a different team of leaders
and with different equipment, so we're learning a lot!

In these last weeks, things are changing, and fast.

Two things I've noted:

First, many of you have made choices as individuals and as families to limit your contact.

Even before we opted for online worship this week, a number of you were already saying to me
things like: we've decided we need to worship online this month.

And second, even when we're careful in so many ways, this variant is spreading fast, really fast.

Positive cases have been popping up for a number of us and our close circles.

That means within our community of faith, there's a lot of potential exposures,
a lot of quarantining, counting days, and trying to find tests,
and a lot of taking care.

If you or your family get sick or need help, please let us know, let me know.

We can be part of a safety net for one another and we'll do what we can.

Last Sunday after church, our kids and I went to get tested at the site in Brooklyn Park.

We stood outside in a very long line on a very cold afternoon.

I got in touch, again, but in a new way, with what a strange and intense time this is.

I suspect many of you have had experiences like this over this last week or two.

A day later our results came back as negative,

but reality is, this COVID is everywhere and

one of these days, despite our greatest care, the tests may be positive.

It's okay to pause, to stay home, to reduce risk, and to take care.

Let's turn to our scripture for this morning.

We have landed smack in the season of Epiphany, of revelation.

So quickly they grow up!

Today's gospel reminds me of the time warp of our assigned lectionary readings:

Just two weeks ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus at Christmas.

Last week we recalled the wise men's search for the baby and Herod's fearful and violent response.

This week, fast forward 30 or so years, Jesus is an adult.

With the crowds who have curiously heard the call of John, that rabble-rousing prophet,

Jesus has ventured to the banks of the River Jordan.

There's a sense of humility, of humanity, in today's readings,

and there's a thread of the Holy Spirit at work in these mundane times.

Debie Thomas comments:

"The holy child conceived of the Holy Spirit,

celebrated by angels,

worshiped by shepherds,

and feared by Herod,

stands in the same muddy water we stand in."

She continues: "The Messiah's first public act is a declaration of solidarity. God is *one of us*"

Truth is: The early church didn't know what to do with this!

This much solidarity, this much humanity, this much God in the weeds and muck of life.

Historian John Dominic Crossan captures this reality.

He says that for that early church, a church that had expected a triumphant messiah,

this is an "acute embarrassment".

Jesus, though, seems to know exactly what he's doing.

He's stepping into the mucky river and into all that this life includes—

the pulls of temptation and sin,
the grief of sorrow,
the joy and hope and regret and betrayal and exhaustion,
the reality of death, the promise of life eternal, all of it.

Jesus is in it.

Stepping into the river Jordan,

drenched in baptismal waters,
the Holy Spirit descending,
the voice of God whispering, again, "You are my child, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Jesus is in it with us.

Friends, in a time like this, with all that we're facing,

we need a Savior who can step into the muck,
a God whose voice sounds again: You are my child, the beloved.

That's not so different than what the prophet promised in the first reading:

Remember; "Thus says the Lord, the one who created you, O Jacob,
The one who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.
I have called you by name and you are mine."

When you come to the rivers,

when the challenges seem too much,
when the divisions just might break us open,
when you wonder if you can endure for even one more day,
hear again God's promise to the beloved, to me, to you:

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name and you are mine." Amen to that!

This week Eric Ringham and I were talking by phone.

It was Thursday morning, the first anniversary of the January 6, 2021 insurrection.

We'd both heard parts of President Biden's speech.

We were talking about our service this morning, in fact about this sermon,
and what we are facing in these days.

We yearned to hear the humanity and the wisdom of some of those saints who have been in it with us,
those who have died in recent days.

Bishop Desmond Tutu died the day after Christmas.

I remember a day in December in 1998 when Bishop Tutu and South African President Nelson Mandela
made their way into the meeting hall at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare.

We were in the middle of the 8th Assembly of the World Council of Churches.

I was a young adult steward, passing out papers, organizing seating for the delegations.

And Bishop Tutu danced down the aisle, bouncing in his unique way, his legs on springs,
his spirit buoyed with a God-given energy,
his message grounded, and his call and trust strong.

We are nearer God's reign for his life.

He worked at what we now call the intersections:

the intersection of race and freedom,
politics and religion,
gay rights and human right,
systemic change and heart change.

He knew how much we needed one another.

Speaking once about the struggle against apartheid in South Africa,

Bishop Tutu recalled how much it mattered that people all over the world
were praying for an end to apartheid.

He commented, "When you know someone is praying for you, in Alaska, by name,
?what chance does the apartheid government have?"

Dear ones, God's beloveds, do not fear, for I have redeemed you.

I have called you by name and you are mine.

Eric and I also were thinking about Lowell Erdahl, who died in mid December.

Beloved Lowell was a pastor here at Hope from 1972-1982,

but he was also a Bishop in the American Lutheran Church.

and later a Bishop in the St. Paul Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Lowell was a spouse to Carol, a parent to Becky, Paul, and Beth, and a friend.

He was a preacher, a writer, a peace activist,

a voice for LGBTQ inclusion and racial justice.

Bishop Erdahl was one of those who stepped out to ordain me and queer-folk
before the ELCA would allow it.

When Hope was becoming a sanctuary congregation in late 2016, early 2017,

I called him up and realized that we'd *been* a sanctuary congregation already, back in the 1980s.

As our service continues this morning,

I invite you who knew him to add memories of his ministry to the chat line on Zoom.

Finally, I'm thinking of a musician, a poet, a theologian, a church hymn writer, Susan Palo Cherwien.

After some months of illness, Susan died in that quiet week after Christmas.

Some of you knew Susan.

More of you knew her words for prayer and praise,

for many of her hymn texts are included in our red hymnal.

We'll sing one of her pieces at the close of the service today: Rise, O Church, like Christ Arisen.

This verse catches me, but truly, they are all lovely:

“Service be our sure vocation,

Courage be our daily breath,

Mercy be our destination

From this day and unto death.

Alleluia, alleluia,

Rise, O church, a living faith.”

We can savor those words.

Beloved ones, today, this week, when it seems like too much,

Jesus is in it with us, with Desmond, with Lowell, with Susan...with you, with me.

May the spirit of these saints encourage you.

May grace be your way and your path.

May you hear again the steady voice of God: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.

I have called you by name and you are mine.” Amen