

“God’s Love Revealed”

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Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Does anyone remember the movie “The Lion King”? It came out about fifteen years ago. Animated, but still a very powerful story. There are two scenes from the movie that I’ve been thinking about. First, was at the very beginning, just after the lion cub, Simba, was born. A sort of baboon-shaman type figure places a mark on Simba’s forehead, then holds him up for all the animals in the jungle to see, and they all bow.

Well, you may remember that Simba is later fooled by his evil uncle, Scar, into believing that he is responsible for his father’s death. So Simba runs away. And he stays away until he’s grown. Then, once he’s an adult, the baboon-shaman finds him and tells him his father isn’t dead, and that he can take Simba to him. He then leads Simba on a long, winding, breathless run to find his father. They stop at a pool and the baboon points into the water and says, “There is your father.” Simba looks in the water, but only sees his own reflection, but the baboon tells him to look closer, and as Simba looks his reflection is transformed into his father’s face.

Simba finds this all very confusing, so he runs away again into the open savannah, under the starry night sky, and in the sky he suddenly sees a vision of his father among the stars. His father calls his name: “Simba,” he says, “remember who you are.”

In every good story, I think, there comes a moment when the main character has a revelation and discovers something about themselves that was there all along, but needed the right conditions to make it evident. Jesus’ baptism, Luke tells us, is such a moment in his story. It is at the moment of baptism that Jesus hears God’s voice. For Luke this is an interior moment for Jesus. While others might see the dove rest on him, no one else hears the voice, hears God say, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Now, baptism, for us Presbyterians is mostly a sign of our response to God’s love. We do talk about its cleansing effects to wash away sin, but for the most part it is symbolic of our recognition that God has made a claim on us. That’s why we bring our children to be baptized. Infant baptism, for us, isn’t a measure taken to protect our children’s souls from jeopardy in case something happens to their bodies. Rather it is our acknowledgement that God chooses us before we can make a choice for God. God chooses us in spite of what we might become. God chooses us because we bear the imprint of God’s face, and God will not reject God’s own. Baptism, for us, is not God’s wrath thwarted; baptism is God’s love revealed.

At times, though, we forget that. Sometimes our lives become overwhelmed by events that disappoint us or frighten us or discourage us and we forget who we are. We

forget whose face we carry in the world. And God's love is obscured. That was the experience of Israel in her exile. Carried away by enemy forces to a strange land, the people of Israel sat and wept at the rivers of Babylon. And as their exile endured they became in danger of forgetting who they were.

It took a prophet like Isaiah to speak to them to jar them out of their despair. We often think of prophets having something to do with the future, but Isaiah isn't nearly as concerned with the future as he is with the present. He knows they're walking through deep waters, that their lives have become a fiery torment. Even so, God tells them through Isaiah, "I will be with you...I have called you by name; you are mine." God insists on claiming them even though their lives have so often been a disappointment to God. Nothing they do can turn God away from them. Why? "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

Through Isaiah God reminds Israel who they are. Nothing they do can alter God's love for them; nothing they do can cause God to disown them. God's love is revealed to Israel by the willingness to give up whole nations for Israel's sake. That's how deeply God loves them.

And in Christ we discover that God's love is not restricted to Israel. In Christ we discover God's love is for us all. No one is beyond the reach of that love. Regardless of how life may have disappointed you, regardless of how undeserving you might feel, regardless of the ways the world may reject you, God claims you as God's own, for you carry God's own image within you.

And that is why we remember Jesus' baptism, and why we celebrate our own baptisms today.....