

One With Us

Bible Reading:

Isaiah 61: 1-4

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

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It happened a long time ago, and seems like a rather strange event.

John the Baptist, last of the Old Testament prophets, was preaching. Calling people to repent, to let go of God-dishonouring lifestyles and embrace a way of life that was pleasing to Him. As a sign of that commitment he baptized. Into the water and back out as a symbol of cleansing, of new beginnings, new commitment.

It was a preaching and baptism happening among people who were reaching out towards Heaven, longing for contact, longing for heavenly life.

John preaches about the coming of One far greater than himself.

A Holy One.

One with true power - fire-like, life altering power.

And then..... there He comes

Jesus.

Coming forward with all the rest; lining up to be baptized as a sign of commitment to righteous living, sinless living, new beginnings with God.

We read about it in these few short words from Luke.

And perhaps they seem so strange.

After all, John is baptising people out of a life of sin and into a life of cleansed purity.

So - why Jesus?

Isn't He already pure?

Answer - He was baptised to be fully identified with us.

Among us.

One with us.

There was no sin *in* him, but there was sin *on* him.

This baptism demonstrated that; publically showing Jesus assuming His role as Messiah, assuming the God-given responsibility of shouldering the sins of the world and bringing them righteousness.

And so - down into the water He goes.

Down – a posture Jesus assumes throughout His life;

emptying Himself completely, says Philipians 2, and taking the form of a servant – an emptiness that would eventually lead to death on a cross where the final washing away of human sin would happen;

only that would be a washing with His blood, not water.

As He goes down something incredible happens - incredibly exciting!

For years Jewish believers had experienced a real heaviness – the heaviness of a closed heaven. For years the heavenly glory of God had not been seen in the temple. For years there had been no prophetic word. Heaven was closed up tight.

It was a heavy closeness that the people felt. Prophet Isaiah already cried:

“Lord, look upon us from heaven, where you live in your holiness and glory. Where is your great concern for us? Where is your power? Where are your love and compassion? Do not ignore us!.....Why don't you tear the skies open and come down?” (Is 63:15; 64:1 TEV)

Finally –

here was the day that the skies were torn open.

And down came.....

more than just a prophetic word!

It was the Holy Spirit of God Himself, settling on the One called The Word - the ultimate Word of God in the flesh, God with us, Jesus.

The Spirit settles on Jesus.

This is the same Holy Spirit that settled on the womb of Mary with the miracle of virgin conception, new life in her womb.

He comes down and hovers over Jesus just as He hovered over the waters of the earth at Creation.

He comes down in the form of a dove –

- a dove: the same bird that went out from Noah's ark and returned with an olive branch indicating that new life had blossomed.

- the Spirit here is a sign of the new life that Jesus will bring to all who believe in Him. As 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "*If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old has gone and the new has come.*"

The Spirit settles on Jesus, empowering and preparing Him for a life of service

– service that begins right after this highlight moment with a huge time of testing, tempting and spiritual battle in the wilderness.

Jesus' going down opens the doors to heaven.

Jesus' going down brings the Spirit's presence.

And a great heavenly word of affirmation and blessing.

"You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus came to be one with all the people in the crowd.

And not just in the crowd so long ago.

He came to be one with us.

For in that crowd with whom Jesus came to identify are people with faces like you and me. **WE** are in that crowd.

We are among those to whom Christ has come to bring righteousness, from whom Christ will lift the burden of sin and its guilt.

We are among those who need to fall down in open, humble repentance for sins committed, violations of God's pure will and pleasure.

Jesus went down into the river to be baptized **for us**.

To become one **with us**.

To save **us!**

And that the heavens opened over Jesus - let that stand as a marker for us who wander to and fro here on earth, stuck on the treadmill of day to day life.

A marker that heaven **remains** open – the door will no more slam shut, the welcome mat is out for all who approach through that person of Jesus.

As we send our prayers heavenward and trust they are heard.

As we plead for daily guidance, and new strength.

Heaven is open to believers - and mercy is poured out.

The Spirit came on Jesus as a dove.

That same Spirit came down on the first believers in Jesus at Pentecost, and ever since rests in the heart of every single girl and boy, woman and man who believes in Jesus Christ.

Through Jesus the Spirit rests on **us**.

Lives **in** us.
And gives power **to** us.

And the voice –

Ah, the voice that proclaimed Jesus as the well-loved son!
That same voice speaks to believers, calling them daughters and sons of the Heavenly Father. It is the inner voice of the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:16:
“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”

Jesus is the conduit that brings the very voice of God into our lives.
*“You are my son.
You are my daughter.
I am so **pleased** that you are mine!”*

Today’s workplace sends a rather harsh message to us:

Perhaps you please us. Perhaps not. Depends on your skill set. Depends on your productivity. The accountant’s bottom line will say how pleasing you are. It will dictate if there is a place and a future for you.

Neighbourhoods and communities send another message:

You’re not really pleasing. Or displeasing. We’re just too busy to worry or think about you at all. Quite frankly – you don’t matter.

But the heavenly Father looks at us through Jesus and says,

*“I am **delighted** to have you!
You are mine, and that **pleases** me!”*

The voice from heaven saying, *“You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*

That voice is quoting Isaiah 42.

If you open the Bible to Isaiah 42, you read this about Jesus -
that He will not break a bruised reed, or snuff out a smoldering wick.

In other words:

He’s not looking for the big, the beautiful, the powerful.
He has a special place and delight for the needy, the hurting, the weak.
When everyone else runs past you, Jesus stops and waits.
When no one else will listen – He, from open heaven, hears every sigh, every whisper.

Isaiah puts it this way in ch.61 -

*Isaiah 61:1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.*

Isaiah speaks of the brokenhearted, captives, those who mourn, who grieve those in ashes, in mourning, sunken under despair.

Can you relate?

This past week we had to say goodbye to Betty Meyer. Her family has a big empty spot in their life as they enter 2004. They mourn.

Others of you struggle, too - each in different ways, as you, too, experience pain and challenge in this season that is supposed to be full of rich, good cheer.

So -- how do we try to cope with that?

Sometimes we try to ignore it. Simply turn the feelings off. Deny them. Submerge them under a thick blanket of fa-la-la's and mistle toe.

Sometimes by trying to escape. Run - fast and hard: to work, or cheap, empty entertainment, perhaps drink or medicate your pain away. Perhaps in spending - there's a big temptation, especially this time of the year.

Sometimes we just wait it out; wait for the wound to bleed itself dry. Eventually the grief dies because time dries it out; eventually there simply are no more tears. The well has run dry.

Well, the prophet calls out about another way,
a way that is going to replace the ashen grey looks & dark swollen eyes
with beauty;
gladness instead of mourning,
praise instead of a faint spirit.

The prophet proclaims the switch of beauty for ashes. If you would see the Hebrew text of this proclamation you'd see that "beauty" and "ashes" are virtually the same words - each with three consonants.

Only difference is that two of them are reversed in order, and in so doing it stands the meaning on its head.

There is going to be a switch in the order of life - something that will stand things as they presently are on their head.

Says Isaiah - there will come the oil of gladness instead of mourning. Think of this oil as a cologne. It was used at celebrations in the Ancient World. Splash on the scent. Throw open the curtains, turn on the lights, crank up the music, dance a holy jig to celebrate great things occurring.

And put on your party clothes - a garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; or as another translation puts it, a spirit of despair.

Desperate hopelessness and sadness, a despair about any meaning -- that's going to be reversed, just like those Hebrew letters.

One is coming who will bring you from hard, gritty dirty survival to joyful, light, carefree living.

Today is Epiphany Sunday - where we remember the public appearing of Jesus into His time of ministry, beginning with His baptism.

The baptism where He was so clearly identified as one with us.

One with us in our darkness.

One with us in our pain.

One with us in our grief.

In Isaiah 61 the prophet says he has been anointed to "bring" good news. The word used there was one used to describe someone who has come back from the heat of battle with news of victory.

There's been a great battle. But good news - there's been victory.

Proclaim the results -

the brokenhearted will be healed, the poor will be made rich, those in captivity will be set free.

It's the year of the Lord's favour.

Hear the heavenly voice proclaim God's favour over the waters of baptism.

See the Saviour rise from the water.

Rise to begin His journey towards the cross where He would finally and fully win peace and eternal life for us all.

where He will win an eternal peace and splendour in the presence of God, living forever in His pleasure and favour with a life that the prophet poetically describes
as large flourishing oak trees,
planted by God, reflecting His goodness and splendour.

The death of Betty this past Thursday brings us face to face with our weak, limited, finite lives. We stare the great enemy in the face.

But the gospel proclaims that this enemy does not have the last word.

Christ turns death into but a doorway through which we pass;
a doorway to eternal glory,
a doorway that takes us to the beginnings of an existence of peace and joy and everlasting goodness in the very presence of God.

And if we can believe that, remember that, and live with the anticipation of that coming, if we can see beyond the charred and twisted wreckage of the immediate surroundings to what is coming just over the horizon, we can already now begin to live strengthened, restored lives.

For He is with us.
One with us.
Forever.
Amen.