



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“A Clean Break With the Past, A Clear Boost to Follow Jesus”

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

Renewal of Baptism and Healing Ministry This Sunday, we share an opportunity you don't find in many churches—a renewal of our baptisms. Many of us were baptized once, perhaps years ago, as a sign of our faith if we were of age; or, as a sign of hope and promise, if our parents made faith promises for us.

But life draws most of us away from God. We may still intellectually believe the things we said at our baptism—that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior, the Lord—but our lives don't look much different from the lives of people around us who don't want anything to do with God, or Jesus, or Church (especially the Church).

I can identify two reasons for this. First, the Church has a wrong model of what it means to be a Christian, in one of two ways. The Church has either operated out of a Christendom model—believing that being connected to a church makes one a Christian. Or, the Church has followed an Evangelical model that has emphasized an individual's once-for-all decision for Christ, but without the change of life that would give that decision integrity. If you work with the wrong model, you'll get wrong results.

In addition to the problem of the wrong model, a second problem haunts the Church: emphasizing a confession of faith, or baptism, or confirmation, or baptism by the Holy Spirit as THE GENUINE start of a Christian life—but overlooking the ongoing relationship with God that is the hinge-pin of what Richard Foster calls, “the with-God life”. Let me put this simply: every day when you get up, you are deciding (whether you acknowledge it or not) whether you will be a Christian that day. If you are going to be a Christian that day, the first thing you'll do is reach out for God, to get your orders—from God's perspective—on your character, your decisions, the hours ahead. Friends we get our lives given to us fresh every morning, and only one day at a time. Thus every new day is a fresh chance to live for and with Jesus—or not.

What did you decide this morning? You are in worship with God's people, as Jesus was, and that's a mark of a faithful follower of Jesus. Good for you! And how will you be a Christian once you turn your back on this building and head out toward your car? How will you be a Christ-follower when you get home? during your afternoon? during your evening? And how about tomorrow? THAT's the “with-God life”.

Am I putting down baptism, or any other faithful act that represents a clean break with the past and a clear boost to follow Jesus? Not at all. In fact, we're about to check out what God says about these things.

First, let's examine Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus, which you'll find in Luke's gospel, chapter 3. I'm going to read verses 15-17, and 21-22. It's a simple, short record, but what it shows us is stunning. Listen with me for God's Word to US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

From John, we get a fiery sermon that points to one coming after. John, however, was not known as John the Preacher; he was called John the Baptist because he was known for baptizing. And baptizing *Jews*.

Jews did not normally practice baptism. If you were born into a Jewish family, you were (ta-DA) a son or daughter of Abraham. For Jews, baptism was only for people converting into Judaism from another religion (or no religion at all). THOSE folks needed to be purified—and do many other things—if they were to be fully accepted in the Jewish community.

But Johnny B’s message was different. He looked at conventional sons and daughters of Abraham and said, “YOU need to clean up your act. SHOW it by this cleansing in water, and LIVE it with a new life that is faithful to God’s covenant with Abraham.” (You know--Genesis 12, one, two and three)

A large number of ordinary people were moved by John’s urgent invitation. But the religious authorities were concerned. Johnny B claimed a source of authority that was not under their official control. John might threaten schism, or sectarian division. So the religious authorities (and the political authorities as well) kept John under surveillance.

One of the men who steps out for John’s baptism—a man named Jesus, from Nazareth—has an experience of the Holy Spirit that changes him, charges him up, and confirms his Heavenly Father’s love. From this moment, from this baptism, Jesus of Nazareth is launched into ministry—preaching, calling others to the with-God life, healing, serving, and ultimately giving his life for the world for the sake of God’s love. So yes, Jesus is changed, charged, confirmed—and he is also commissioned for ministry in this cleansing that shows a break from the past and a boost for faithfully living for God. Jesus is baptized once; but his baptism is no graduation from the school of Godly living—it is only the start. With his baptism, it’s “game on!”

God the Holy Spirit continued to show up in people’s lives, as this text from Acts will show us. I’ve got my finger on Acts, chapter 8. Find that passage, and in your own translation, listen for God’s Voice, beginning in verse 14. *[text]*

Get the picture? Clearly, there is more in the with-God life than hanging around church and serving on committees. There is much more to the with-God life than believing in God. The with-God life is about knowing God, experiencing God. That’s something the Holy Spirit does, and it’s a clean break from the past and a clear boost to follow Jesus. You don’t have to speak in tongues—there is no mention of that in this text. But the Holy Spirit will give you a sense an intimacy with God that raises up your gratitude to such a level that you want to serve God. And God honors that by giving you one or more gifts for ministry to others—because ministry is how God wants to be served!

The final passage today is from the prophet Isaiah, as he was given the message of comfort and encouragement for Israel after so many years of gloom and impending judgment. Find Isaiah 43, verses 1-7. What is God saying to YOU in these words? *O God, speak to Your people again!* *[text]*

God is out to bless his people, to bring them back into the place He had given their ancestors, to start over with them. Here, too, was a clean break from the past, and a clear boost for faithfully following God. A new start! A new life!

I wonder what it was like for Jesus to hear these wonderful words from God.

I wonder what it was like for those early believers—in Samaria, of all places!—to meet the Holy Spirit.

I wonder what it was like for Isaiah’s hearers, listening to this message of hope.

These are gifts of God for the people of God. Don’t you want all that God wants to give you? I do!

Would you dare to make a new start in this new year, claiming more tightly the promises of your baptism, and daily choosing to live connected with God, looking for God, listening for God, grabbing hold of God’s hand, as you join God in Kingdom work? Would you dare?

Then, come to the font this morning. Let us pour water over your hands, and remind you of your own baptism—your clean break from the past and your turn toward a future of following Jesus. Let us give you a marble—it looks like a drop of water you can carry with you--to remind you to ask, “Am I baptized today?” “When and how will I look for God today?” “Do I depend on God today?” “What is God eager for me to do with these hours ahead?”

Write these questions out and put them by your bed, so they are the first thing you see in the morning. Put a copy on the floor so that when you get out of bed, they are the first thing you feel as your feet touch the floor.

Come to the font, make a clean break with the past, and hold tight to this boost for God’s power to live life fully with Him.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on January 10, 2010, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]