

EPIPHANY I

Year C

The Rev. David Copley is the director of Global Partnerships and Mission Personnel on the presiding bishop's staff and has been working at the Episcopal Church Center since 2006, when he was appointed as the Mission Personnel Officer. David is a native of Nottingham, England, and began his career as a pediatric nurse in 1981. He traveled to Liberia during the civil war in 1991 as an emergency medical relief worker. With his wife (Susan) and daughter, David served as an Episcopal missionary in Bolivia for four years. On receiving a call to ordination, they returned to the US in 2000 to attend Virginia Theological Seminary. After completing their studies in 2003, they were appointed as assistant rectors at St. John's Episcopal Church in Hampton, Virginia. Over the past 18 years, David has travelled extensively throughout the Anglican Communion and has broad on-the-ground experience of the global mission activities of The Episcopal Church within the Anglican Communion. As director for the Office of Global Partnerships, he coordinates a team which serves as a bridge for developing and strengthening relationships between The Episcopal Church and our partners around the Anglican Communion.

This Bible study is part of a series produced by the Office of Global Partnerships of The Episcopal Church.

Isaiah 43:1-7

43 But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.
²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
³For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.
⁴Because you are precious in my sight
and honored and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
⁵Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
⁶I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—"
⁷everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made."

Commentary from David Copley

The book of Isaiah can be seen as an account of both the physical and spiritual journey of the people of Israel and their relationship with God.

Isaiah reminds us that God "gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless" (Is. 40:29). In this reading, we are comforted in knowing that throughout the ups and downs of our faith journey and despite times of doubts, questions, weaknesses, failings, and fears, that God watches over us. This passage repeats this message numerous times. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. Do not fear for I am with you; everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, who I formed and made.

God will continue to call us all by name, every hour of every day, and whatever choices we make, we will always be children of God. On this day, as we remember our baptism, a sign of God's presence with us on our journey, we give thanks for God's promise to us as we journey with Christ.

Discussion Questions

God is present with us all in various ways in this life, in our worship, our community, and through our relationships with friends and colleagues, as well as chance encounters with strangers. Think of a time in your life that was challenging and who was there to comfort you, and perhaps was an "angel in disguise."

How can you be a holy presence to others that you encounter in your journey of life and faith?

Psalm 29

- ¹ Ascribe to the Lord, you gods, *
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- ² Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his Name; *
worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.
- ³ The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders; *
the Lord is upon the mighty waters.
- ⁴ The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice; *
the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor.
- ⁵ The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees; *
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon;
- ⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, *
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.
- ⁷ The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire;
the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; *
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- ⁸ The voice of the Lord makes the oak trees writhe *
and strips the forests bare.
- ⁹ And in the temple of the Lord *
all are crying, "Glory!"
- ¹⁰ The Lord sits enthroned above the flood; *
the Lord sits enthroned as King for evermore.
- ¹¹ The Lord shall give strength to his people; *
the Lord shall give his people the blessing of
peace.

Commentary from David Copley

This psalm is meant to be read aloud in worship with joy and gusto. This is a call to worship and praise of a God who is all-powerful and omnipresent. The psalmist reflects upon the presence of God within the powerful mysteries of nature – in water, fire, thunder, and wind. God is also present with the young calf and young wild ox. The psalmist celebrates and comforts us in describing that God is one who blesses God's people and brings peace. This psalm informs us that God is the God of all creation and is present throughout creation. On this day when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, it is good to remember our place within all that God created, and that we are called to care for all creation.

Discussion Questions

Where do you experience the glory of God's creation in this world? Do you have a special place for quiet contemplation a place that whispers to you through the calming voice of the Holy Spirit in a babbling brook or the gentle sounds of the wind in the trees?

Have you experienced the loud glory in the magnificence of God's creation? Do you have a place where you have experienced the awe and might of nature that shouts of the marvelous presence of the Holy Spirit in this world?

Acts 8:14-17

¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵ The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ¹⁶ (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). ¹⁷ Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Commentary from David Copley

We continue the connection to baptism through our reading in Acts where we hear of Peter and John laying hands on Samaritans who have accepted the word of God and received the Holy Spirit. Note that earlier in this narrative, Philip was baptizing in the community, but it was only when Peter and John laid hands on them that they received the Holy Spirit. While the sacrament of baptism can be seen as marking the beginning of our journey with Christ and the church, our relationship with the Holy Spirit is a lifelong endeavor. We constantly experience the laying on of hands and feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit when we live our lives faithfully. Remember that we are created in God's image and that, as Jeremiah 1:5 tells us, God formed us in the womb and knew us before we were born."

Discussion Questions

Prayerfully read through your baptismal vows (Book of Common Prayer, p. 304).

It can be challenging to live up to these vows every single day, but thankfully "with God's help" and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we strive as much as we are able.

Which vows do you find most challenging to respond to?

Where can you challenge yourself in your daily life to live more faithfully into your baptism? Share some concrete examples within your group as to how you have succeeded and perhaps failed to live into your baptismal vows.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Commentary from David Copley

I can imagine the scene: A long line of people who have heard the preaching of John, a voice crying in the wilderness to all who would listen. His calling was one of repentance and forgiveness as he baptized the throng of humanity with water along the banks of the Jordan. Jesus arrives and joins the end of the line, waiting patiently for his baptism by John. Fully God and fully human, Jesus lines up with the brokenness of humanity and in solidarity with them. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he becomes of part of who we are in our humanity as wounded people, not fully saint or fully sinner, just human beings in all our frailty. Jesus become part of who we are in this world. After John's baptism, Jesus is filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit and declared the Son of God. Fully human as he lined up with the people to receive John's baptism and fully the Son of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism marks the beginning of our faith journey with our siblings in Christ and our journey as children of God. Baptism reminds us that we are filled with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. Learning to fully experience and live into that reality is a lifelong adventure with Christ. As children of God, we are called to live out our baptismal vows in prayer and action, recognizing that all humanity and creation are part of God's care and that we are siblings in Christ with our neighbors in all the world.

Discussion Questions

Where in your life have you lined up with those who are different than yourself and joined in solidarity with others who are also broken and needy?

How are you stretching yourself in your life journey into experiencing the Holy Spirit through the presence of others?