St. Brendan's
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
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Many of you may have heard our Bishop Thomas Brown's New Year's greeting recently. In his address Thomas spoke of his mentor who often preached the same sermon on the Feast of the Holy Name in early January because it was the anniversary of his own ordination. He always began his sermon by saying, "the name of Jesus is given to you by virtue of baptism." That is, in so many words, what I have repeated over and over for every child and every adult I have baptized over the years. *"You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever…"*

I wished I had understood this when our children were growing up. All of them were baptized as infants and when they asked about it as they grew up, I always told them baptism was about forgiveness and repentance because that was what I heard in every sermon and thought I read in the Scripture. But one of them told me that didn't make sense. We're baptized because Jesus was baptized but why does Jesus have to be baptized if he is sinless? So used to hearing the forgiveness line in church, I didn't have an answer. Not only were they puzzled, they also wondered why they had to be forgiven for just being born.

Fast forward to seminary, many years after this conversation, I began to understand Baptism in a whole new way. What if instead of asking why Jesus is baptized like we are… maybe we can think about why we are baptized like Jesus. Pastor David Lose put it this way, *"God forgives us not to make us God's children but because we already are God's children. Forgiveness is a result of God's love for us, not a condition of that love…Yes, Baptism is about forgiveness. But forgiveness is not a mechanism but a gift."*

The practice of baptism can be traced back to Jewish ritualistic practices such as mikvah, a pool of flowing water used for purification that originated during the second temple period. We know this because the Dead Sea scrolls contain references to washing, bathing, sprinkling and immersing. So as faithful Jews, there is nothing unusual for the crowds to be lining up beside the Jordan to be baptized by John. But the ferocity of John's message was **unusual**. It both inspired and frightened the people.

John intones Isaiah's prophesy *"Prepare the way of the Lord/make his paths straight….and all flesh shall see the salvation of the God."* (Luke 3:4, 6). For goodness sake, Israel has been waiting for 550 years for God's promise of a savior to release them from the tyranny of the Roman Empire…the poverty, the hopelessness, the helplessness. Now John is telling them to prepare for that savior. No wonder the people flocked to John, forget his stinky camel hair and diet of locusts and honey.

All three of the synoptic gospels include an account of Jesus' Baptism. In each version the people question whether in fact John is the hoped-for savior, but they are quickly dissuaded of that notion as John makes clear from the start that one more powerful than John is coming after him.

Only they weren't expecting that someone more powerful than John would be standing in line in muddy sandals, chatting and waiting his turn. They imagined someone, say, a bit more upscale…a figure who might have more fittingly inspired awe and respect rather than this plain, scruffy young Jewish man standing in line with them.

For whatever reason, Luke does not even say that John baptized Jesus only that Jesus was baptized and was praying when the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and a voice came from heaven, "*You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased."*

And so, on the banks of the Jordan river, through the Holy Spirit, God publicly names and claims Jesus as his Son.

I know this story by heart as I'm sure many of you do too… but I need to tell you that I have never preached or even read the same Scripture more than once that I don't find something new God has for me to ponder. And today I am struck by the power of YOU….and how we need to be reminded of the power of YOU…in our broken and divided world the power of YOU matters.

Pastor Karoline Lewis tells a story of baptizing a family of five when she was a pastor in the Midwest. When she said to one of the older members of the family, *"YOU have been sealed by the Holy Spirt and marked with the cross of Christ forever."* She looked up and there were tears streaming down this older member's face. Later this woman admitted that she never imagined God's love could be for her.

I get what she was thinking. I can tell you honestly when I felt the call to ordination, my first thought was…oh no, not me. I'm not enough…but a good friend who is a Sister in the Community of the Holy Spirit in New York City said to me at the time, "Have you forgotten your baptism?" And she quoted to me "*YOU have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever."* YOU are enough and have been enough since that day. The Power of YOU.

Last Thursday I watched Jimmy Carter's funeral at the National Cathedral. Over and over, one speaker after another, related one example after the other of how nothing got in the way of his doing what he believed he was called to do…not a small village in Africa, not a small construction for Habitat, not a small Sunday School lesson…he simply persisted in doing what he believed was the right thing. Because Jimmy Carter believed in the power of YOU.

We are living through times that are just as chaotic, just a violent, just as divided as that of the ancient Israelites. May Jesus' baptism stand as

a reminder of the power of YOU. God says to each of us, through our baptism, you are my son, you are my daughter, you are beloved.

Through baptism God has empowered us to be healers and helpers, to be the hands and feet of Christ to transform our broken world, each of us in our own way. The power of YOU is to be fully and wholly ourselves in making this world more just, more compassionate, more joyful even.

Let us begin this new year not in despair or hopelessness but rising up. Let us remember we have been empowered by the God of love to do all we can do, as Jimmy Carter did, to move us toward the kingdom of God. Amen