

## We Belong to God!

### 1 Epiphany C

"I have called you by name, you are mine."

Hear the comforting words of assurance from Isaiah: "*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When 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. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior*". Isaiah 43:1b-3b.

What if we were to acknowledge the personal message from God to each of us today by putting our first names wherever the word "you" appears? Let's try that! Did it make sense as you were substituting your name?

It may sound silly at first! When we personalize God's message we may hear more clearly what God wants to do in our lives. Today we celebrate the baptism of our Lord, and we remember our own baptisms. As we recite the baptismal covenant, we renew the promise of this covenant between God and ourselves. What better way to start the new decade that has just begun!

Both Holy Scripture and our catechism teach us that God is always with us, because we belong to Him. Baptism is the sacrament of belonging. Water baptism is just the physical part of the covenant – a cleansing of our old ways and the outward promise we make between God and ourselves. Water baptism identifies a person with a particular faith – *that is all it does*. Various religions baptize with water. Water alone does not make a person committed to Christ's body; the Church. Besides water, what else makes us part of the body of Christ?

It is the gift of the Holy Spirit. By Him we belong to God. I can baptize with water like John the Baptist, but only the Lord Jesus can baptize with the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit by which we are marked as "Christ's own forever," is a spiritual promise that we belong to God. The promises we make back to God and one another through the words of the covenant are based on our baptism by water *and* the Spirit.

Examples in life can teach us the same lesson. Jumping off a 30 meter platform into a pool during basic training by itself, did not make me a sailor. Or being born into a Japanese family, does not automatically give you the ability, or even the desire to speak Japanese. There is a conscious and continuous effort required to accomplish these things. The same is true of the Holy Spirit. We must willfully and consciously accept Him into our lives. Christ's consciousness must continue to grow within us all our lives. To receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at baptism is only the first step.

God gives us everything we need to be productive in the Christian life. Whether we sink or swim in that life depends largely on us calling on Jesus, our lifeguard, to bring us up to the surface when we are floundering.

Yet God will never take away the agency of free will. The Holy Spirit is always there for us; like a life jacket that supports us....but we are responsible to put that "life jacket" on and keep it on! Long after the water has dried we strive each day to make

a mature decision to live out our baptism. It is a conscious choice that we must make anew, every day. The choice is always ours but it is a choice to be baptized with fire. Jesus says, *“Come, and I will baptize you with fire.”*

You’ve heard of a “baptism by fire”? That’s a Jesus baptism. No sprinkling of water. In fact, there is no water at all. When Jesus baptizes, it is like the rush of a gale force wind that’s the power of God’s energy coming to stir up everything. Jesus baptizes with a fire that burns away the chaff of life. The unnecessary parts are incinerated. Gone are the addictions that devour. Greed and pride and arrogance and violence become a pile of ash. We begin our new life as His. Sometimes our baptisms by fire are the hard lessons we must learn.

No one looks forward to a baptism by fire. It’s human nature to run the other way, to delay, to hope it will pass by. Finally, it becomes clear that the only way home, the only way to wholeness, the only way to life is through the fire. It takes all the courage one can muster to walk into the fire, trusting that it will not destroy everything. That is when Israel remembers — that is when we understand — the promise of the Lord: *“When 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. ... Do not fear, for I am with you”* Amen. — Ed Searcy, “When you pass through the waters,” January 14, 2007, *University Hill United Church Congregation*, <http://sermon.uhill.swift-web.com>