

## **The Baptism of the Lord**

Readings: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Okay so we're halfway through January. Can I have a show of hands, how many people made a New Year's resolution this year? Now keep your hands raised if you're still sticking to that resolution. Congratulations to those with their hands still up. Apparently it takes 21 days to form a new habit so you're almost there. If you're someone who put your hand down don't feel bad. Statistically speaking you're very unlikely to stick with your resolution. Not me though. I don't mean to brag but I've managed to stick with my New Year's resolution for the past four years running. And I'm going to tell you the secret that has helped me keep my New Year's resolutions and I'm not even going to charge you money for it. Listen closely, the secret behind my four years of success is...

Every year my resolution is "I will not make resolutions I have no intention of keeping".

And it's amazing how easy it is to keep your resolution when it's essentially "don't make resolutions". Okay, for those who will say I'm cheating I will say that I actually considered having a real resolution for this year. I was going to stop procrastinating so much. But then I decided that can be 2020's resolution. But more seriously, I have a friend who thinks he knows why people don't stick to their resolutions and he says that it's because if you're waiting for an arbitrary date on the calendar to start making improvements in your life that probably means you're not all that committed to following through. But we all make them and it occurred to me that I have no idea why and when we started this tradition of starting the New Year with a pledge to go to the gym, to stop worrying so much, to get a promotion at work, or to get out of debt. And I thought I was onto something when I started to wonder if this was all a concoction of the self-help industry to make money. Think about it, quite a few of our social customs were invented by people wanting to sell their products and it makes sense that a clever marketer realised that they could sell more self-improvement books if we started to associate the New Year as a time to improve ourselves. It turns out I could not be more wrong. According to the experts at Wikipedia the custom of making New Year's resolutions goes all the way back to the ancient Babylonians who would start the year by making promises to their gods that they would return borrowed objects and pay off debts. And I just love the image of an ancient Babylonian vowing to Marduk that this will be the year they return their neighbour's leaf blower and give their old poker buddy that 20 bucks they still own them from five years ago. And the Romans would start the year by making promises to the god Janus - which is where we get the word January from.

So it appears that this desire for self-improvement is actually a very ingrained part of the human psyche. We seem to be haunted by this idea that what we are currently doing isn't working. We are caught up in these destructive behaviours and patterns of thought and know that it's killing us.

I was recently reading a book by the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann and a passage stuck with me:

"The conquering of need, dependence, and suffering through activity, work, and accomplishment is taken for granted by us. What are we longing for? We strive for a life without suffering, for joy without pain, for community without conflict. This is what we call

"good fortune." With such good fortune the capable and successful among us, the people of achievement, are rewarded-apparently. I say "apparently" because this is not really the case; "reward" is manifestly the wrong word. The idolatry which is implicit in all our work, achievement, and success demands sacrifice, as does all idolatry. The sacrifice we bring to the idols of our desire and of our society are great. In our personal life the one-sided orientation toward accomplishment and success makes us melancholic and insensitive. We become incapable of love and incapable of sorrow. We no longer have tears, and we smile only because we are expected to keep smiling all the time. Starvation in the third world no longer affects us: "Those lazy, shiftless people ought to get to work!" We suppress our own pangs and disappointments: "I find that I am happy only when I am working." Trusting the promises of the gods of work and accomplishment we can perhaps attain a life without pain and without conflicts, but we pay bitterly for it. We become apathetic, still alive but slowly and surely dying inwardly."<sup>1</sup>

Now I said I was recently reading this book but it's not a new release. The Passion for Life was published in 1978. Forty years ago Moltmann was describing our current culture. We keep doing the same thing and it isn't working. We need something new.

And the insidious thing about idolatry is not just that it leads us away from worship of God. When God demands to be worshipped alone it's not because He's insecure and needs constant affirmations to sooth His ego. Rather idolatry leads us into some rather dark places. In the ancient world you always had to keep the gods on your side by making ever increasing sacrifices to them. When you ran out of livestock to sacrifice to the gods, you would mutilate your body to prove your devotion. And when mutilating your body wasn't enough you would sacrifice the last thing you had to give - your children. And this idolatry hasn't remained in the ancient world. The obvious one is money and success. There's a reason the Bible says that greed is the root of much evil. How many famous millionaires are there out there with stories of human exploitation and backstabbing in their wake? Or we worship success at work and sacrifice our families on that alter. Or we worship power and obtain that by trying to control everyone around us until we end up very lonely.

Here's one that men can fall into very easily: the idolatry of masculinity. We get sold this very toxic idea of being this macho alpha male with a swagger and in doing so we hurt the women in our lives and teach our sons terrible lessons about what it means to be a man. I was recently reading the biography of the former AFL player and actor Terry Crews in which he describes growing up with an abusive father and how resulted in him growing into a man who had to control everyone and would fly into full on fits of rage at his children until he broke out of what he calls "the cult of toxic masculinity" and learnt what it meant to be a loving father and to embrace healthy masculinity. In fact there's a rather touching anecdote in the book where he talks about taking his seven year old son Isaiah out for "Man Time" to go see the superhero film Iron Man 3 but he soon realises that young Isaiah is putting on a brave face and trying to hide the fact that he's absolutely terrified of what's happening on screen. So Terry takes Isaiah out and tells him it's okay to be afraid and suggests they go swimming instead of watching the rest of the film. And so he went from being trapped in the

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<sup>1</sup> Jurgen Moltmann. The Passion of Life: A Messianic Lifestyle (Kindle Locations 126-131). Kindle Edition.

idolatry of toxic masculinity and was set free to be a positive role model for men. And even today Terry Crews, a devout Christian, is challenging unhealthy expressions of masculinity, in particular the idolatry of masculinity that led to the mass sexual assaults that birthed the #MeToo movement.

The point is that idolatry is a deeply dehumanising thing that not only leads us away from God but that also deeply harms us and those we love. And in this idolatry is where we find the people of Judea.

So before we jump into the Isaiah passage we need to know some context behind it. This passage is directed at the Jews in the Babylonian Exile. These Jews had lived in the Kingdom of Judea but had turned away from God and instead devoted themselves to idolatry and injustice. And so God allows Babylon to conquer the Judeans and take them into captivity as a form of punishment. Isaiah 42 describes the Judeans as being willfully blind and deaf. Verses 18-20, and 25 read:

*“Hear, you deaf;  
look, you blind, and see!  
<sup>19</sup> Who is blind but my servant,  
and deaf like the messenger I send?  
Who is blind like the one in covenant with me,  
blind like the servant of the LORD?  
<sup>20</sup> You have seen many things, but you pay no attention;  
your ears are open, but you do not listen.”  
<sup>25</sup> So he poured out on them his burning anger,  
the violence of war.  
It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand;  
it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart.*

It all seems horribly bleak but then we see a tonal change. In chapter 43 God promises to be with his people as he redeems them. Two things I in particular want to highlight from this passage that would have struck the ancient reader. The first is that it opens with an affirmation of the creator God. Those who have heard me teach on the Genesis creation accounts will know that I emphasise the need to understand them as being written to a people that didn't live in a vacuum. They knew their neighbour's creation stories about the gods going to war with each other to create the world in bloody conflict. The Genesis accounts attack this narrative by stating that there was only one God responsible for the creation of the world and that he stands above all other gods. By reminding his audience of the Creator God, Isaiah warns them not to turn to the Babylonian gods while in captivity and that there is only one God who can save them.

Secondly, God states that he will be with them when they pass through the waters. Any Jew would hear this and instantly be reminded of the Exodus when they passed through the split waters to escape the Egyptians. And the biblical writers often link the Exodus with the first creation account. In Genesis we have God beating back the primordial waters of chaos in order to create the world and in the Exodus story you have God beating back the writhing depths of the Red Sea in order to lead his people. By evoking the creation and the Exodus,

Isaiah is reminding the Judeans that the same God who conquered chaos and who saved them from Egypt is fighting for them and will save them from the Babylonians.

And this is reinforced by the use of language here. "I have redeemed you", "I have summoned you", "when you pass through the waters I will be with you", "Do not be afraid for I am with you". There is this real sense of nearness of God to His people. Not only is he fighting on their behalf, He is also dwelling with them and will not abandon them.

And we see the culmination of this closeness in the figure of Jesus. Today's reading is from the Gospel according to Luke - a gospel that the New Testament scholar David DeSilva wonderfully subtitled "Following the Heart of the Father". The passage starts by quoting the prophet Isaiah telling us that John the Baptist was "a voice calling in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord, making straight paths for him so that all people will see God's salvation."

And it says that the people started to wonder in their hearts if John might be the promised Messiah. And John almost seems to read their minds and says "There is someone far greater than I coming who will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire". There is this excitement and tension that something new and better is near. And then we get this culminating moment in which Jesus is baptised and a voice from the heavens declares "You are my Son, whom I love; and with you I am well pleased".

Okay so there's a lot to unpack here. Let's start with the significance of the declaration that Jesus is the Son of God and that God is pleased with him. This acts to confirm Christ's ministry and authority and it does this by linking him with the god the Jewish people knew as Yahweh. It says that the God who created the universe, the God who took you out of bondage in Egypt, the God who promised to act as your redeemer and saviour is dwelling amongst you in the flesh. You can reach out and touch him. All those stories you heard growing up about the God of your ancestors and now he's standing in front of you.

And what does it mean to be baptised of Spirit AND fire? Luckily for us the answer is in the text. John says that the one who comes after him will gather up the wheat into his barn but will burn the chaff in an all consuming fire. So there's a bit of debate over what this means precisely, especially because only Matthew and Luke mention a baptism of fire. It's most likely a reference to Judgement Day when God judges the living and the dead and removes all evil from this world. However, I think we can also take a creative sub-interpretation of what it means to be baptised of Holy Spirit and fire in our daily lives. And I'm not saying that this is what the main meaning of the text is; rather I'm indulging in an old Jewish tradition of reinterpreting the text to make a spiritual point. So don't email me or throw biblical commentaries through my front window. So I think we can look at the Holy Spirit and fire as being symbolic of the two-fold work of God in our lives as we follow and grow in Him. First we receive the Holy Spirit who guides us and strengthens us. In John 14, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "the Helper who will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things I said to you". So the Holy Spirit is God's encouragement and presence whom we walk with. But part of being a Christian is allowing God to refine and mold us. In that same discourse from John we know that God is also a gardener who prunes all branches that don't bear fruit. And so I think we can also think of the fire as being the act of God in removing the idolatry in our life that holds us back from truly living as God intended us to live.

And Jesus calls us away from idolatry and into something new: new life in the Kingdom of God. He calls us away from the idols that demand so much sacrifice from us and instead says

*“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”*

I want to leave you today with a quote from Nadia Bolz-Weber’s book *Pastrix*. Nadia is a Lutheran pastor at House For All Saints and Sinners and has a gift for being completely vulnerable and honest about her shortcomings as a pastor and a follower of Jesus and using those to illustrate God’s patient grace. She writes:

*“Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for my failings. My failings hurt me and others and even the planet, and God’s grace to me is that my brokenness is not the final word. My selfishness is not the end-all... instead, it’s that God makes beautiful things out of even my own crap. Grace isn’t about God creating humans as flawed beings and then acting all hurt when we inevitably fail and then stepping in like the hero to grant us grace—like saying “Oh, it’s OK, I’ll be a good guy and forgive you.” It’s God saying, “I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word. I am a God who makes all things new.”*”