

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Isaiah 43:1-7

^{43:1} 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. ² 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. ³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because 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. ⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶ I 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 – ⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Commentary

Second Isaiah preached to the social and political elite of Judah who had been living in Babylon for half a century. Although they enjoyed some political and religious freedom, they felt guilty and pessimistic. He prophesied to them that a leader would soon come from captivity and lead them home. He also extended God's salvation beyond Judah to all the nations. The exiles thought God had deserted them—and perhaps had even disappeared from history. During all this, Second Isaiah saw hope in the person of King Cyrus of Persia who was about to overthrow Babylon. He prophesies that God would again call Israel by name and would protect them through the dangers that they would face in a return journey across the desert. God would redeem them by giving Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba in Arabia as ransom and would gather the scattered exiles from across the earth. Notice the powerful imagery with which the promise is offered—in flood and fire, protection, and amid fear, rescue and restoration—a reminder that they have been lovingly and personally cared for even in their strife.

Reflection

Who has served as a “prophet” to you? What did this person say or do to comfort or assist you?

Acts 8:14-17

^{8:14} 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

A single writer is the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Addressed to Theophilus, the books are similar in language and style. Together they tell a continuous story. Hellenists in this account were Greek-speaking Jewish Christians who probably interpreted the Torah less stringently than the “Hebrews,” who were Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem Church. The appointment of Philip represents the earliest expansion of Christianity into the Greek-speaking world, although he was still in Jerusalem among the Jews. Besides distributing food, Philip traveled north to Samaria on an evangelistic mission. Animosity had long existed between the Jews and Samaritans. They shared a common heritage through Jacob but differed radically in their respective commitments to Jerusalem and Mount Gerzim as sanctuaries and in their laws and purity codes. The Jews considered the Samaritans to be lax in their religious observances. Jews and the Samaritans avoided contact, as Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan demonstrates. For Luke, Jesus’ ministry moved from Galilee (north of Samaria) toward Jerusalem in the south; then Christianity later moved outward from Jerusalem. Philip’s outreach to Samaria signifies the expansion and continuation of that work.

Reflection

What hostile situations exist today in your community or denomination? How might you bridge these barriers?

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

^{3:15} 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 thong 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

In 1000 B.C.—a millennium before John the Baptist—David became king of Judah and also Israel. God promised that His descendants would reign forever, yet after Solomon died (about 922 B.C.), Israel rejected a Judahite as their king and chose their own. The Jews remembered YHWH's promise to David and looked for a descendant to rise as the anointed king or messiah, reunite the scattered peoples, and establish God's reign of peace and prosperity. Each of the Synoptic Gospels treats Jesus' baptism differently. Luke says only that "Jesus also had been baptized." His focus is on what happened afterward: Jesus prayed; the heavens opened; and the Spirit descended "in bodily form like a dove"; and a heavenly voice spoke. Rabbis taught that when the last of the prophets of Israel departed, so did the Spirit; but that occasionally God caused a "daughter voice" to speak from heaven. After His baptism, the voice identified Jesus as "my Son," thus connecting Him to Israel's past when Isaac was the child of God's promise to Abraham. Israel's king was called the Son of God, and Israel itself was called God's son. Identifying Jesus as God's son not only points to his special relationship with God but also connects Him with the people's messianic tradition. Here is the essence of the relationship between God and Jesus—the love that blesses and unites. Coming after Luke's report that John is imprisoned, the baptism signals the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Reflection

How do you respond to those that might question that Jesus is the Messiah in this day and age? What might you say to them from Jesus' work in your life to speak to their doubts?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 29

^{29:1} Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

² **Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.**

³ The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.

⁴ **The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.**

⁵ The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,

and Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷ **The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.**

⁸ The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;

the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

⁹ The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;

and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

¹⁰ The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

¹¹ **May the LORD give strength to his people!**

May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**