

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle within us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations. May the words of my mouth, the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight O Lord, you who are rock, redeemer & Renewer of us all. Amen. (Ps 19:14)

Grace and Peace AND A Happy New Year be with you, dear Friends!

How is it with your soul? How did you let your light shine this week? How did your Star Word speak into your life? (I'll say more about Star Words in a bit)

Let's turn our attention to the scriptures read today. What would you say is the dominant theme? Water (waters, rivers) or Fire (2x)? Baptism?

I agree, water and Baptism are important in both these passages. In the Isaiah text, water is used to remind the hearers of how God brought God's people out of Egypt, delivering them, providing an escape from slavery by crossing the Red Sea (v2 When you pass through the waters I will be with you). In the Luke passage, John the Baptist is calling people to the water to show they are changing their hearts and lives to live in line with God's ways (v11-14).

I also believe there's more than water & baptism at work here...I believe there's a gift of Presence that runs through both texts that have meaning for the faith community today.

Looking at the first text, Isaiah speaks of the vision he is given, and we hear of God's presence and action: I have; I am; I will... redeemed you; called you; be with you; bring, gather, created and formed you. God is present and active in the life of God's people, and particularly so in times of trouble, or struggle. Why is this stated? Because God has created and formed you; you are precious, valued and loved. God is present. God is active. This is The Gift of Presence.

Looking at the text of Luke, John is the speaker, calling people to commit their hearts & lives to God's ways (sharing what you have, not cheating or harassing others). Further, John also is clear – he is NOT the expected Messiah, who is yet to come. And then, we hear a most understated line, 'when everyone was being baptized, Jesus was also baptized' (v21a). After which, Jesus prays. And while Jesus was praying, the heavens opened, Holy Spirit appeared and a voice spoke. 'You are mine. I love you. You make me happy' (v22).

God is present. God is active. This is The Gift of Presence. This is also a promise. Could God's plan be made any more clear and explicit?

In these two passages, across the span of centuries, we hear God has a plan and is acting to bring 'all I created for my glory' into lasting communion (Is 43:7). Enter the Holy Spirit, who empowers the new works and restoration.

What is this gift of Presence? In his baptism, Christ is anointed for his prophetic mission. From this moment forward, Jesus' words and deeds reveal his unique sharing in the Spirit of God. From his baptism through his public ministry, to his death and resurrection, Jesus' actions give witness to his nature as Son of God/Son of Man. His identity, purpose & mission become complete in his death and resurrection. As the glorified Lord of All, he does more than possess Spirit, he gives the Spirit.

So how does this gift of presence work? Let's look at three life events in Christ.

- 1) Christ's conception
- 2) Christ's baptism
- 3) Christ's resurrection

Each of these are essential events in the salvation story. The Spirit of God is present in each event. This fact reveals the depth and length of God's intention and action to be with us. The theophany (presence of God) at Jesus' baptism empowers, affirms and sends him forth in his mission. This also foreshadows another mission empowering moment for the church – Pentecost. This is why at every Christian Baptism we celebrate the power

of the Holy Spirit making and revealing the children of God. The very same Holy Spirit is making us into sons & daughters & children of God; the one who calls us precious, honored and loved.

Let us remember two things about the Gift of Presence.

- 1) We celebrate the first PUBLIC acknowledgement of Presence in the sacrament of Baptism by water and the Spirit. We renew the covenant with God who promises to be an active presence in our life and we renew our commitment to nurture others as siblings of God. We belong to God and we belong to one another (UMH, 35).
- 2) We also covenant with God and one another as members of God's household to BE signs of God's Presence in our words and actions when we confirm our faith and formally commit to participate as a member of a particular faith community and its work by prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness (UMH, 38).

Friends, the Gift of Presence is a promise that you are known and never alone in relationship to God. And, yes, friends, **something NEW happened in Jesus' birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension.** Jesus created & formed the Church to bear the light in the world. **The church is the New presence, an active agent to bring the gospel (good news) to bear on all of society.**

So what does this mean? We, as the church – the body of Christ- we are the Light in our World. We are the gathered people of God in a particular location. **Our mission – the work of the church- is to use our variety of gifts (Eph. 4:1-16) in doing good against the powers that be to live in Christ's rule, God's kin-dom.**

The key, friends, is in how we choose to live and love because of who we believe is: our savior, our redeemer, our GIFT OF PRESENCE and the Light of the world, and who we are as Children of God... children of the Light. (Think about this...God has NO grandchildren!)

Last Week, all were invited to take part to receive a Star Word. Once again, this week, on the table in the Narthex, are STARS. Select one to take home

with you. On the star is a word. Let this star word be your gift from God in this New Year. Post the star in a highly visible place – where you will see it.

You may find it is a word that fits you perfectly. If so, celebrate that, and see how you can be more intentional about sharing your gift with the world. You may find it is a word that offers you the encouragement or challenge you need. If so, receive that gift and let it shape you in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

You may find yourself resisting the word or even wanting to reject the word. If that is the case, I encourage you to sit with it for a while, explore the source of your resistance, and be open to what this word may have to teach you.

Live with your word, reflect upon it, journal about it, talk about it with others, and share your thoughts with me. Discover how this Star Word may shine its light on you and on your path throughout this coming year.

Friends, How will you shine your light this week because of this Word? May it be so. So be it. Amen.

Leading Into Prayer Let us JOIN voices TOGETHER once again, to make room for the prayers for God’s people, church & world, As we sing: verse 3 “Jesus the Light of the World” **WS 3056** (*in the worship guide, or on the screen.*

Hail the heaven born prince of Peace

Jesus the Light of the World

Light and Life to all he brings

Jesus the Light of the World

Walk in the light, beautiful light

Come where his love and his mercy are bright

Shine all around is by day and by night

Jesus the Light of the World

THE LITURGIST, Barbara Cook, will LEAD us in prayers for God’s people, church & World ...