

# Chosen, Empowered, Beloved

## Baptism of the Lord Sunday Ordination & Installation of Ruling Elders

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22    Isaiah 43:1-7  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Last Sunday, January 6, we celebrated the Day of Epiphany, the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. We explored the story of the magi's journey, following the star to worship and present gifts to Jesus. But we also entered into the season of Epiphany, which lasts until Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of the season of Lent.

Let me repeat from last week that the Greek word **epiphany** literally means "manifestation" – an appearance or revelation. In the broadest sense of the term, an epiphany is an occasion when something either appears or is revealed to you. It is often described as **an illuminating discovery**, especially one that comes unexpectedly. We often call these "Aha" moments. In a spiritual setting, an epiphany is often used to describe the revelation or experience of the Divine or Sacred in our midst. And in a biblical context, an epiphany story includes those occasions when the Presence of God is revealed in and through Jesus. **From the perspective of the gospel writers, these stories are meant to reveal a clearer understanding of Jesus' identity.**

The Sunday following the Day of Epiphany, like today, is always designated on the liturgical church calendar as Baptism of the Lord Sunday. It is also considered an epiphany story because after Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove. And a voice from heaven declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). This reveals that the manifestation of God's Presence is made known and can be found in Jesus. It was the gospel writer's way of revealing: **If you want to know what God is like, look at who Jesus is, hear what Jesus says, and pay attention to what Jesus does. That's why, as Christians, we can declare that Jesus is the definitive revelation of the nature and character of God. And a progressive Christianity perspective would add: yet, not necessarily the only revelation or manifestation of the Divine.**

That's the primary theological purpose of the story of Jesus' baptism. But there is also a practical side to this story. Through his baptism, Jesus is commissioned and empowered by the Holy Spirit for his public ministry and work in the world. At one level, then, from a functional standpoint, Jesus' baptism serves somewhat the same purpose as an ordination and installation of church leaders. Here's why.

As Presbyterians, we view the act of ordination (whether it be to the office of teaching elder (pastor), or ruling elder, or deacon) as the public acknowledgment that through the nominating process and vote of the congregation, a person has been called by God to serve as a leader in the church. Yet **ordination, we must always remind ourselves, is not a call to privilege or power. It is a call to service.** Further, just as with Jesus, we believe that God empowers those who are called and ordained with the indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit in order to help them fulfill their duties and

responsibilities in leading and guiding the congregation. So, there is a saying, “**God doesn’t call the qualified, God qualifies those who are called.**”

Let me state clearly, however, being commissioned for service to God and the church is not limited to those who are ordained and called to serve as a ruling elder or pastor. Here’s the point. **Just as with Jesus, your baptism signifies that you are also called and empowered by the indwelling Presence of God’s Spirit to further the ways of God’s – ways of love, compassion, peace, forgiveness, inclusion, reconciliation, justice, and hope.** So as we focus on Jesus’ baptism this morning, I would be remiss if I didn’t ask you to remember this particular meaning of your own baptism.

**You are chosen! You are empowered! You are beloved! You, and each and every one of us, have a valued place in the family of God. And because of that, nobody can tell you or me our lives don’t matter. Nobody can tell us we are unloved. Nobody can tell us we don’t belong.**

Interestingly, we can also find meaning in our baptism, and in ordination and installation, through the Old Testament passage we heard this morning from Isaiah 43. Hear these words again as if addressed specifically to you as a message from God.

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through the fire you will not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. (Isaiah 43:1-2, 4a)*

Jill Duffield, editor of The Presbyterian Outlook, makes an important point when she writes: “Imagine if all the people coming into our churches this Sunday were filled with that expectation, anticipating that God would call them by name, rescue them from the floods threatening to overtake them, shield them from the fires that would consume them and fill them with the flames that reveal the Word of God. Imagine if they heard the voice of God tell them publicly: You are mine. You are beloved. I am so pleased with you.”

Perhaps we need to expand our imagination. For we are beloved children of God, and through God’s indwelling Spirit, we are empowered to carry on the ministries of Jesus. That includes ministering to those in obvious need, of course. But it also involves **ministering to each another as members and friends of this particular community and family of faith known as College Hill.** For this ministering is not just the responsibility of your pastor, or your Ruling Elders serving on the Session. It’s a calling to which you are called, as signified by your baptism.

So, may God help us all to live out our baptism. For you and I are chosen, and empowered, and beloved.

Amen.