

Welcome

Since I was about 10, I've felt alone. In 4th grade, my parents moved in the middle of the school year. It's always hard being the new kid; it's way harder when you're dropped into the middle of a year. I grew up being the nerdy kid - picked last for dodgeball, not having a set of close friends. Even after college, that sense of loneliness stuck with me - I was single through most of my 20s, and I still remember times when it seemed like everyone I knew had someone else they'd rather spend time with and I was home alone.

You might think that the story ends with, "And then I got married and lived happily ever after," but of course that's not true. Marriage doesn't fix loneliness.

I bring up loneliness this morning because it's one of the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. Over the last couple of years, we've experienced more than a day or a week of loneliness. A growing number of us feel lonely often or all the time. It can be crushing. Even for married folks. Even for a house full of kids. Even for introverts.

And let's get this out of the way right away: I don't have a cure for loneliness. I don't have a magical way to end the pandemic and get everything back to normal. But what we do find today is an affirmation of God's presence with us. It's an unequivocal announcement that God sees us in our isolation and pain and God is present with us in that.

I hope you can join me in receiving that love. Let's begin by celebrating this God.

Message

Welcome to the season of Epiphany! This time in the church year, we ask who God is. Who is this one who came to us on Christmas?

This year, our series is called Deep Breaths. We're at the beginning of 2022, almost two full years into the COVID-19 pandemic. We're all tired. We're all wondering how many more variants we'll have to deal with, how much longer until we can relax a little.

The idea of *doing* more right now is exhausting. So we're not doing. We're resting - resting in who God is.

In both Greek and Hebrew, the same word means both 'breath' and 'spirit'. So as we breathe deeply here at the beginning of the year, we're also pausing to make space for God's Spirit to fill us.

Given the last couple of years, we could use some comfort, some of God's presence. And we all want to know: When is this going to be over?

How much longer do we have to deal with *gesture around* everything?

I want to answer that question with another question, and it's one that I know keeps you all up at night.

Why did Jesus get baptized?

The burningest of burning questions. Right? Like, how did you ever make it to today without that question being answered?

All kidding aside, it IS actually sort of a strange question. Because baptism is a sign of repentance. When the baptismal candidate steps down into the waters, they're showing that they've acknowledged sin in their lives and turned from it. By coming up out of the water, they're committing to follow the way of God.

So... why does *Jesus* do it? He was sinless. He had nothing to repent. The answer to that question, believe it or not, is the best faith-filled answer we can find to our anxieties about the pandemic and our divided, exhausting world.

It matters who was baptizing Jesus - a guy named John (who was Jesus' cousin, though that doesn't matter much here). John did some weird stuff in his preaching: he dressed in camel hair and lived in the desert area on the East side of the Jordan River.

That was all intentional - he wanted people to see him as a prophet, in line with the old Biblical prophets like Ezekiel, Elijah and Isaiah.

Imagine if a political leader today showed up dressed in an 18th century war uniform and talked about having 'just crossed the Potomac'. We'd understand he wanted us to see him as one of the founding fathers. His dress and words would have a particular historical and political weight to them. That's how John's self-presentation came across as well.

So let's look back at one of those prophets. What did they say about who God is, and how can that help us make sense of Jesus showing up for John to baptize him?

Turn with us to [Isaiah 43](#).

The book of Isaiah is one of the main places Jesus' early followers saw inspiration for John. In this passage, the prophet is speaking to the Exiles - those who lived through the destruction of Judah by Babylon. They saw their homes, their nation destroyed, and then they were forcibly deported to live in Babylon.

Isaiah wants the Exiles to understand their captivity in Babylon as a sort of second slavery. He looks back to Egypt, when Israel had been enslaved to Pharaoh, as a way to understand their current experiences (and you'll hear that in the passage).

We're far removed from the world of biblical slavery (the American institution of chattel slavery is very different). In the world of the Bible, you might sell yourself into slavery if you couldn't feed

your family. But it wasn't permanent - a family member could buy you back out of slavery. That was called *redeeming* or *ransoming*.

So listen to what the prophet says to these captives in Babylon who are wondering if their god is even real, if there will ever be an end to their suffering:

But now, O Jacob, listen to the Lord who created you.
O Israel, the one who formed you says, "Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. -- Isaiah 43:1 (NLT)

God begins with the beginning... creation. I created you and I have ransomed you. Note that ransom language. To us, it sounds like kidnapping, but to those Exiles, it meant God named them family. God is coming to rescue them like a faithful father, unwilling for his children to remain in slavery.

Building on the slavery metaphor, God goes on to invoke imagery from the Exodus story, specifically the parting of the Red Sea and the Jordan River:

When you go through deep waters, I will be with you.
When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown.
When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. -- Isaiah 43:2 (NLT)

God promises that, no matter how painful the times get, no matter how large the obstacles or difficult the journey, God is present with them, protecting and preserving them.

Finally, God drops all the past metaphors and speaks directly to the Exiles, who had begun to call themselves 'the Scattered', drawing on imagery of a farmer scattering seed.

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you.
I will gather you and your children from east and west.
I will say to the north and south,
'Bring my sons and daughters back to Israel from the distant corners of the earth.

Bring all who claim me as their God, for I have made them for my glory. It was I who created them.' -- Isaiah 43:5-7 (NLT)

To the Exiles, God says: You are my family. You belong to me.

To the Exiles, God says: I am with you in your darkest moments.

To the Exiles, God says: I am not finished with you. The best days are still ahead.

So back to Jesus' baptism. Why does the sinless one part the waters of repentance?

Because he is saying to those among whom he walks: You are my family. You belong to me.

He's saying to his peers, bent under the boot of Roman oppression: I am with you in your darkest moments.

He's among them as a promise: I am not finished with you. The best days are still ahead.

Friends, what does it mean for us to receive God's promises?

What does it mean to understand that God claims us as God's own children? What does it mean to seek out God with us even in our darkest moments? And what does it mean to believe in faith that God is not finished with us?

Prayer + Meditation

Friends, what does it mean for us to receive God's promises?

Epiphany is the season that shows us who God is. We know God because we know Jesus. Jesus shows us who God is.

So who is God?

God is the one who comes among us to be baptised with us.

In the midst of our chaos and confusion, God names us among God's own children. You are God's family, the ones for whom God will give God's own life to buy back from slavery.

In the midst of our stress, anxiety, pain and defeat, God stands next to us, holding us up with God's own strength. No matter how dark the night or how heavy the burden, God is with us, helping us.

In the midst of our divided and antagonistic culture, God whispers that God is up to something better, if we will only look for God's work with eyes of faith.

So today, friends, will we hear God call us family? Will we feel God's arms giving us strength? Will we trust God's promise that the best is yet to come?

Will we believe Jesus when he shows us who God is?

Communion + Examen

God invites us to God's own table.

Where have you experienced God with you this week?

When have you felt an absence of God?

When in this next week might you not sense God with you?

How can you make space to attend to God's presence with you this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Meditation