

## ***God Revealed - in Spirit***

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### **Gathering**

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*Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.*

*This week, it would be appropriate to find a **white cloth** or scarf to signify that we are in a time of "celebration".*

*Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*

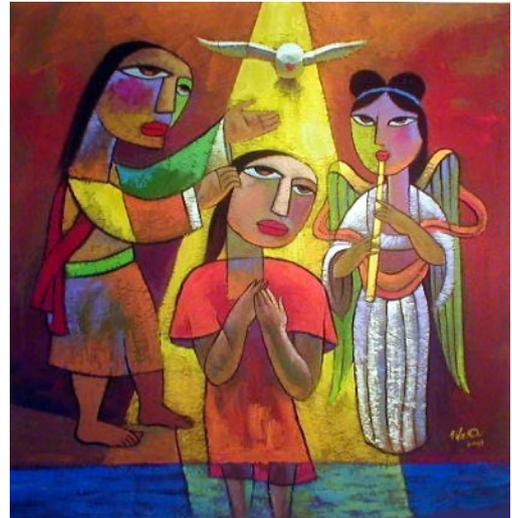
### **Light Candle**

We light a candle to centre us and to draw us towards Christ.

The writer of the gospel attributed to John assures us:

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

*John 1:5*



The Baptism of Jesus, He Qi

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

Across this vast and beautiful land that is now called Australia, indigenous peoples have cared for the earth since time immemorial.

In this place, between the ocean and the mountains, the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation have lived in harmony with the land and waters and its flora and fauna.

We give thanks for them and this place.

We pay our respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

And we pray that we will learn to walk together and to care for one another and this land in ways that honour our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

### **Call to Worship - from Psalm 29**

*I want to begin with a reflection based on Psalm 29, and I invite you to hear it as a call to worship and a prayer*

The voice of the Lord.

The voice of the Lord...

...wafts over the waters,

...thunders over the valleys,

...breaks the cedars of Lebanon,

...makes the calves leap and skip.

The voice of the Lord...

...shakes the wilderness,

...flashes forth in flames of fire,

...flickers in a votive candle,

...echoes from the heavens.

The voice of the Lord...  
...appears like a fluttering dove,  
...comes like a stranger on the bus,  
...whispers to our souls,  
...screams at injustice.

The voice of the Lord...  
...ignored by the rich,  
...loathed by the powerful,  
...adored by the poor,  
...seized by the voiceless.

The voice of the Lord...  
...causes the oaks to whirl,  
...strips the forest bare,  
...unleashes truth,  
...reveals hypocrisy.  
The voice of the Lord.

*Spill The Beans, Issue 41, Resources for 9 Jan 21, p.73*

**Sing** - A Voice Is Heard (Seasons 2-6 or All Together Whatever 430)  
*So we sing our praise as we open our eyes, our ears and our hearts to God's voice  
echoing through creation, speaking to us.*

*Come, let us praise our God,  
come let us sing for joy.  
With a heart of thanks we give honour.  
You are a mighty God,  
you are the source of life.  
Creator God, we give praise.*

Through the darkest night – a voice is heard.  
Through the breaking dawn – a voice is heard.  
Through the heart of life – a voice is heard.  
All creation sings! God is heard!  
*Come, let us praise our God...*

From the deepest seas – a voice is heard.  
From the highest hills – a voice is heard.  
From the rich dark earth – a voice is heard.  
All creation sings! God is heard!  
*Come, let us praise our God...*

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**Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7** (Julia Szulerowski)

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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

<sup>4</sup> Because you are precious in my sight,  
and honoured, and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
nations in exchange for your life.

<sup>5</sup> Do not fear, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you;

<sup>6</sup> 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 -

<sup>7</sup> everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.'

### **Prayer - Praise, Confession, for the world**

**Response:** Don't Be Afraid (Seasons 7-15)

*Words and Music: John Bell*

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O God, we gather this morning, aware of the awesome power of creation - in the wildness of the ocean, the fierce winds that fan bushfires that consume everything in their path. Aware also of the cooling refreshing touch of water and breeze on a hot summer day. Your creation - so breathtakingly beautiful, so fearfully powerful.

God, forgive us when we lack respect for what you have created, when we take it for granted or take risks at the cost of lives.

God we pray for people who have lost everything in flood or fire or drought, we pray for the families of people who have been injured or died at the mercy of oceans or deserts or fires or floods.

*Don't be afraid, my love is stronger,  
my love is stronger than your fear.*

O God we yearn for peace,  
peace that reaches the depth of our being  
peace between nations,  
peace between neighbours,  
peace in our families.

Forgive us when we fail to be peace-makers:  
when we see conflict or violence but walk away afraid to intervene  
when we wind people up or inflame situations instead of soothing  
when we close our eyes to injustice in order to avoid conflict.

*Don't be afraid, my love is stronger,  
my love is stronger than your fear.  
Don't be afraid, my love is stronger,  
And I have promised, promised to be always near.*

As illness and dis-ease spreads amongst our community once more,  
we pray for people who provide medical care and those who work to support them  
we pray for people who are unwell.

*Don't be afraid, my love is stronger,  
my love is stronger than your fear.*

Gathering God, you draw us from the ends of the earth.

There is nowhere we can hide from your love's reach.

Here in this place, with this group of people, we are all shapes and sizes, with all sorts of expertise and even more opinions.

God, forgive us when we withdraw from a world, frightened and no longer able to see how we can share your love.

Forgive us when we insist on our own way of seeing things or doing things and fail to leave space for a new idea or suggestion.

Forgive us if we have stopped sharing your good news in word and action because we are scared of what others might think.

Forgive us for remaining quiet when we know we need to speak a different truth.

Forgive us for all the excuses we find to not act, to not speak, to not write - all the excuses that are really about what we fear from others, rather than about how your love draws us to be.

*Don't be afraid, my love is stronger,  
my love is stronger than your fear.*

*Don't be afraid, my love is stronger,*

*And I have promised, promised to be always near.*

### **Words of Assurance**

Here these words from Isaiah 43:1 again:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

And, the prophet proclaims, God draws God's people from the ends of the earth.

In a few moments, we will hear God's Spirit calling, naming, embracing Jesus at his baptism. So we sing again: of the joy and life the Spirit brings.

**Sing** - Where The Spirit Is, There's Freedom (TIS 421)

*Where the Spirit is there's freedom.*

*Where the Spirit is, there is life!*

Not by the world can our freedom be  
nourished,

not by our things, only by Spirit.

Practise, my children, to live by the Spirit,  
drop all your masks, take freedom's  
clothing!

*Where the Spirit is there's freedom.*

*Where the Spirit is, there is life!*

Heaven on earth, here we live free to  
love and to share, carried by joy.

Practise, my children, to live by the Spirit,  
daring today to taste God's future!

*Where the Spirit is there's freedom.*

*Where the Spirit is, there is life!*

Wounds will be healed, eyes will be  
opened,

imaging God, reflecting Jesus.

Practise, my children, to live by the Spirit,  
heaven is here, time made eternal!

*Where the Spirit is there's freedom.*

*Where the Spirit is, there is life!*

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## Listening for God's Voice

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### **Reading:** Luke 3:15-22 (Julia Szulerowski)

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptise 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 baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>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.'

<sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. <sup>19</sup>But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, <sup>20</sup>added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>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.'

For the Word of God in Scripture,  
for the Word of God among us,  
for the Word of God within us,  
***Thanks be to God!***

### **Reflection**

Holy Spirit, as you descended upon Jesus at his baptism, move amongst us now. Nudge us, shake us, to hear your voice, reminding us that we belong to you, and we are loved. Amen.

Can you remember your baptism?

Many of us were probably baptised as a small child, possibly even as a baby, and have very little recollection of the occasion except for the photographs. My baptism photos reveal all the men in suits, and my mum and her best friend wearing very special looking hats and "Dame Edna" glasses (late 1969)!

I have better memories of my confirmation - which happened when I was about 15. Confirmation is a way of affirming the promises that were made on our behalf when we were baptised as children. We sometimes use a similar kind of affirmation when people change denominations.

I recall resenting having to spend my Sunday afternoons at the vicarage (I was a teenager, after all) and while at some stage I prayed the prayer the Minister said I should - asking for God's forgiveness and promising to follow Jesus - it was at least 5 more years before I began to take it more seriously.

Some of you perhaps have better memories.

Perhaps you were baptised later in life - as some denominations prefer.

I'd love to hear your stories sometime.

These days, I get to do the baptising - young and old - it is a great privilege and generally a joy-filled occasion. Celebrating a baptism or confirmation also energises everyone present. But, sadly, they are happening much less often.

Perhaps you have yet to be baptised and are wondering what I am talking about.

The early followers of Jesus embraced two practices that have endured through the ages, passed down from generation to generation, that embody, give us a glimpse of, the people we believe God calls us to be.

The first is the sharing in bread and wine together - the remembering of the night Jesus shared with his friends before he died. At one time it was a full meal - the stories in Acts tell us that the early church gathered together regularly, several times a week, to share a meal together, to encourage one another and to pray. Today we share in a stylised version - but still giving a glimpse of who we can be together.

And the second is baptism. Baptism, at the time of the early church, was not only practiced by the disciples of Jesus. It was practiced by a number of different groups to signify their commitment to a new way. The water, the washing, in and of itself, is a symbol understood the world over, as a cleansing. The plunging into the water is like a drowning, a death, with the person being drawn up to the surface and breathing a new life.

When we baptise adults today, we sometimes still do that.

Not so much with babies - we tend to use enough water to wet their head - but the Orthodox traditions do immerse the baby completely. The babies clothing is removed and he or she is dunked completely into the vast baptismal font.

So why do we bother still with baptism and confirmation?

Jesus, as all 4 of the gospels tell us, is baptised by John in the waters of the Jordon River. For Jesus, as it is for us, his baptism is a turning towards God, the Creator.

Importantly, it is also a public act - signifying to the world that a new path is being taken. Jesus joins a crowd of other people going out to John for baptism (3:21).

The special part is, that after Jesus had emerged from the water, the heavens open and a dove descends, and voice is heard saying, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." (3:22)

"Heaven was open" - in Marks' gospel it is much more dramatic - the heavens are "torn apart" (Mark 1:10) - there is no longer a separation between this idea of heaven and what is within our experience of our lives here on earth - heaven and earth are entwined, enmeshed - and the rift is never sewn up again - this coming together of heaven and earth is for all time - not just in the time of Jesus, but for all time, for us, in our time.

And then, we hear the voice acknowledging and recognising that Jesus is named and claimed by God.

And in our baptism, we are, each one of us, reminded that likewise we are named and claimed by God. We belong; we are part of God's family.

The Scriptures describe being baptised both as a highly individual act and choice and as a decision that might be made by whole families; but always it is embedded in the community of Jesus' disciples.

The way we practice baptism today, while the person being baptised makes a public statement of commitment to the way of Jesus, so the community of faith makes commitments as well. This question is asked of the congregation:

Friends in Christ, will you promise to maintain a life of worship and teaching, witness and service so that he/she/they may grow to maturity in Christ?

***With God's help, we will live out our baptism  
as a loving community in Christ:***

***nurturing one another in faith,  
upholding one another in prayer,  
and encouraging one another in service, until Christ comes.***

How well does our congregation live out this commitment?

There was a time when people could not share in Communion until they had been baptised - it is still the case in many denominations. The preparation for baptism was, and still is, used as a time of intentional teaching including what these things mean for the followers of Jesus. In the Uniting Church, while officially we would say the table is open to all who are baptised, we recognise that many families choose not to baptise their children in order to allow them to make their own decisions when they are old enough, and we would never refuse to allow them to participate in sharing around the table. And for adults, well, we simply don't ask - the table is open to all who seek to follow Jesus - sharing in the hospitality of God is not something we should be "managing" or preventing for anyone. So baptism, starts to seem to feel unimportant - not necessary - these days, I often only get requests from families who are thinking that they might want to send their child to a religious school.

But baptism and confirmation today is still an important part of how we participate in Christian community. As disciples of Jesus, we commit ourselves to ongoing learning and growth (that's what discipleship is) - the preparation for baptism or confirmation lays the foundation for our learning.

As individuals, baptism and confirmation remind us that we are named and claimed by the God of Eternal Love, and that we are part of a much larger family, people both here and all over the world, in this time and in times past and time to come, who are named and claimed by God. We commit ourselves to participation in the community of faith in this place and time. Together, we are called to live out the vision of life that Jesus embodied - and we commit ourselves - to God and to God's family.

So if you are baptised - remember, you are named and claimed, embraced in the Love of God.

And if you think it is time to be baptised, or to make a public statement of commitment - come and talk to me.

Let's pray,

God, you embrace us, each one of us, and you send us into the world to embrace others. Give us courage to speak of your love, to make public our commitment to following your way. And may our love inspire those we encounter to seek your way too. Amen.

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### **Responding**

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**Sing** - One Body in Christ (season 8-23)

*We sing a song that expresses our call together to embody the way of Jesus.*

*One Body in Christ  
called to share the Good News with the  
world.*

*Each of us gifted,  
made in God's image,  
we have a story to tell,  
a story of love.*

We have been baptised in Christ,  
the love of our God  
poured into our hearts.  
Called to share the mission of Christ,  
the Spirit of God alive in our hearts;  
to be a light of welcome  
in the darkness of exclusion,  
an out-stretched hand of love to ev'ryone.

*We are one body in Christ...*

To give voice to the voiceless,  
the unheard in the wilderness,  
an outstretched hand of love to ev'ryone.

*We are one body in Christ...  
(repeat chorus)*

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### **Holy Communion**

*If you would like to share in Communion and are unable to join with us in-person, please let Rev Kath or Rhonda Back know. We would love to bring Communion to you in your home at a time that suits you.*

### **Offering**

*As we have received, so we give.*

*Having thought about our baptism, and shared in bread and wine together, I would usually invite you to dip your hand into the font and remember your baptism or consider whether the time is right to be baptised or confirmed. But right now, that's not so safe. Nor are we able to hand a plate around and take up an offering.*

*So the singing group are going to sing for you a song that speaks of the way God is with us through all our living. As you listen, you might like to reflect on the God who calls you by name and claims you - you belong. And if it is time for you to make a public statement of faith, come and talk to me after the service.*

### **Listen - Borning Cry**

I was there to hear your borning cry,  
I'll be there when you are old.  
I rejoiced the day you were baptised to see  
your life unfold.  
I was there when you were but a child  
with a faith to suit you well;  
in a blaze of light you wandered off to find  
where demons dwell.

When you heard the wonder of the Word  
I was there to cheer you on.  
You were raised to praise the living Lord to  
whom you now belong.  
If you find someone to share your time,  
and you join your hearts as one,  
I'll be there to make your verses rhyme  
from dusk til rising sun.

In the middle ages of your life,  
not to old, no longer young,  
I'll be there to guide you through the night,  
complete what I've begun.  
When the evening gently closes in  
and you shut your weary eyes,  
I'll be there as I have always been with just  
one more surprise.

I was there to hear your borning cry,  
I'll be there when you are old.  
I rejoiced the day you were baptised to see  
your life unfold.

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We pray...

To the north, to the south, to the west, to the east, we pray:  
for all that is possible, wonderful, and joyful  
as we seek and serve Christ, God's beloved,  
in all places and all people.  
May God be well pleased. Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for 9 Jan 21, p.116*

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## Sending

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### **Sing** - Companions on The Journey (Seasons 8-8)

*We are companions on the journey,  
breaking bread and sharing life;  
and in the love we bear is the hope we  
share  
for we believe in the love of our God,  
we believe in the love of our God.*

We have been gifted with each other,  
and we are called by the Word of the Lord:  
to act with justice, to love tenderly,  
and to walk humbly with our God,  
to walk humbly with our God.  
*We are companions on the journey...*  
(repeat)

No longer strangers to each other,  
no longer strangers in God's house;  
we are fed and we are nourished  
by the strength of those who care,  
by the strength of those who care.  
*We are companions on the journey...*

*Words and Music: Carey Landry*  
© 1985 Carey Landry and North American Liturgy Resources

### **Benediction**

Don't be afraid!  
God has called you by name - and goes with you wherever you may go.  
So go into the world with courage and strength.  
Even when the water is rough, God is with you.

And as you are blessed with the love and presence of God,  
so be a blessing to the world you encounter.  
In the name of God: divine mystery, divine Word, divine presence. Amen.

Rev Kath Merrifield  
9 January 2022