

Remember Your Baptism
First Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7
Second Reading: Luke 3:15-22

E-x-e-g-e-s-i-s. It is not a word familiar to or often heard by a significant majority of the larger culture. Exegesis. Honestly, before seminary or knowing how to spell it, when I did hear the word in church, I just figured it had something to do with Jesus. E-x-e-g-e-s-i-s. Obviously, I was mistaken, for within hours of setting foot on the campus of Union Presbyterian Seminary, I not only learned the meaning of the word exegesis, I was coming to understand that it would dictate the shape of my weeks for the next 40+ years.

Exegesis. Ironically, for me it would become mostly about Jesus, though Jesus (spelled differently) is not central to the meaning of the word itself. Exegesis is the process of critically studying a text to — understand the essential intent of the writer's message in it's time; to learn how it's meaning has evolved over time; and to meditate on how those words, that message may best be interpreted and understood in the present age. This process is never perfect because the Bible's authors were never perfect, and all interpreters of the Bible text are far from perfect, some of us, a might bit farther from perfect than others. I cannot claim to be any good at it, but I

am grateful for the teachers and the resources they provided that help me limp to an understanding and convey some sense of what the scripture texts may or could be saying to us today.

Now, in addition to that biblical exegesis, there is another exegesis that is equally essential in ministry in the church, and that is the need to exegete the congregation — Know your audience, your people, understand their shared personality and character. For example, if I'm coming to a church in Charlotte, I'm not going to choose Deuteronomy 23:19 as the text for my first sermon: *"You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent."* That's not the first subject to tackle here in BofA-Wells Fargo-Truist-ville. We could wrestle that text in time, but not on day 1.

So, in addition to the weekly question of exegeting what a text may be saying to us, it is incumbent on the clergy and educators to critically discern whether a new idea or program is a fit for the congregation. When I entered ministry there was among church nerds a growing interest in liturgical reform — Shake things up; rearrange traditional orders of worship; add ancient practices; offer new worship elements from liturgical dancing to

Communion by intinction. Preachers and educators would go to a conference or workshop and come back all fired up about dragging their congregations into trending streams of worship. Sometimes it fit. Sometimes it was a miss. Sometimes it just made a long service longer. We church nerds would be moving the sermon to the middle, experimenting with Taize, reciting the summary of the Law, adding an invitation to discipleship, sprucing up the liturgy for baptism. Sometimes it fit ... and sometimes it did not. Many a preacher sank into depression when their congregation rebelled against changing the hymnal, or adding a screen in the sanctuary, and refused to sing that new hymn in Spanish.

Exegeting the congregation requires a curated sensitivity to local context and culture. A friend serving a small rural congregation up in the foothills decided to include a new invitation to discipleship in the order of worship. That was a confusing change for those folks and they weren't sure how to feel about that. The next Sunday she included language about baptism in her invitation as she stood by the baptismal, cupping her free hand to lift the water, visibly symbolizing the claim of God upon us.

Well, it just so happened that the church had a visitor in worship that week, and upon my friend's invitation to discipleship, that visitor stood up and walked to the front expecting to be baptized.

Now, folks here with Baptist roots may say, "*Well, that ain't nothing but an altar call,*" But among Presbyterians, this was shocking, particularly to my friend ... shocking ... as in something that could happen in a Presbyterian church perhaps once every thousand years. Spontaneity is not a chapter in our Book of Order. I'm about as spontaneous as a block of granite, which is why I feel so at home in the Presbyterian church. You could say that the subtitle of Presbyterianism is — Decently and in order. We are thoughtful. We are planners, calendar keepers, organizers. We study before we speak or act. My Pentecostal friends look at the way I prepare a sermon and say I don't trust the Holy Spirit to give me the words to say, to which I say, Oh, I trust the Spirit implicitly, and the Holy Spirit told me to sit my rear end down at a desk to study and labor over every word!

We don't do spontaneous. We see baptism as something to meditate on, learn about, pray about, talk to the pastor about, prepare for, set a date for, you know ... calendar! So, when my friend saw this visitor walking up

the aisle during the preacher's recitation of this trendy Invitation to Discipleship ... Panic! *You want to be baptized? ... Now?* My friend's thoroughly Presbyterianized brain was racing — We have rules. We have a process. This is out of order according to our Book of Order, and believe it or not, when it comes to the Book of Order, there are Presbyterian pharisees out there sneaking around, looking to safeguard every jot and tittle of that book, those rules.

My friend had never met this man, had no idea whether he understood anything about the baptism he was committing himself to. This is the very type of thing they get very picky about on ordination exams. She knew that technically, she should pull the man aside and say something like, *Why don't we hold off on pursuing this today. Let's meet this week and talk about it before we actually baptize you ... we can't schedule it next week because of communion, and the following week is Youth Sunday, so that's no good, and after that is Children's Sabbath Sunday, and then we're bumping into Holy Week, but perhaps we could schedule something in early May.*

My friend knew the Book of Order guidelines, knew that baptism was a lifelong commitment and shouldn't be an impulsive decision ... but the

church visitor didn't know all of this, and surely, the congregation witnessing this had little understanding about what the Book of Order says about baptism.

Yet, here was this visitor, who having heard the Invitation to Discipleship, wanted to accept that invitation right there and then. The pastor was here. The congregation was gathered. There was even water in the font. What should she do, offend the Pharisees or err on the side of grace? She chose grace. The stranger was baptized. The little congregation welcomed him. There would be no discipline meted out on the pastor, no defrocking. An invitation was made. The Spirit of God was present. The invitation was accepted and the Spirit was honored.

Sometimes, the Spirit of God will not be contained within the lines we draw for it. Sometimes our best intentions and ordered plans are eclipsed by the movement of God in the moment. Sometimes, the best we can do, though never perfect, is enough, trusting that the Spirit of God can fill in the gaps of our efforts.

You've heard me quote Augustine well over a hundred times, "Baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace." Outwardly

with water, we proclaim how the Spirit is working within us in ways beyond our understanding to draw us closer to the God who makes us, redeems us, and sustains us — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In baptism we are affirming God’s posture toward each of us — You are my child and nothing can shake that covenant.

Luke reports, *“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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.”*

In baptism, through the symbol of life giving, life cleansing, life sustaining water, we are acknowledging God’s similar word to us — You are my child. You are my joy. It is not the act that saves us, it is our redemption in Christ that the act of baptism reflects. It is not what we do, but what God has done for us that baptism in Christ represents. Luke is careful to make a distinction between what John is doing and what is happening through Jesus; a distinction between John’s ministry and Jesus’ purpose; a distinction between John’s baptism and our baptism in Christ.

For Luke, John represents that last of the prophets and Jesus is the fulfilled promise for which the prophets hoped. So, Luke is intentional in ushering John off the stage before Jesus begins his public ministry. The age of the prophets had passed. The age of redemption in Christ had begun. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, in essence the one being baptized was saying, "I want to, promise to, do better in order to earn the favor of God." Conversely, we understand that when someone is baptized in Christ, God is saying, "You have my favor, now go out and do better. I will help you." It is not our strength that earns our redemption, it is God's love that redeems us and grants us the strength to live faithfully. As Paul put it, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Knowing you are claimed and loved, and knowing that the One who loves you, also strengthens and equips you, you are enabled to do better, be better.

It is said that the great reformer Martin Luther was plagued at times by feelings of unworthiness and despair, and so above his desk hung an inscription that said, "Remember, you have been baptized." I read that he would often touch his forehead and remind himself, "Martin, you have been baptized." Life is not meant to be about what you can accomplish, achieve on your own. Life is meant to be about what God can accomplish, achieve

through you, with you. You are God's child, God's joy, so with God's love and enduring strength, let us live into our inheritance. Amen.