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# An Open Letter to the Newly Baptized

Isaiah 43:1-7

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 9, 2022 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

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January 9, 2022

Dear beloved siblings in Christ:

Happy birthday! Or should I say, “Happy baptism birthday!” Welcome to the family! (Or as my son—your older brother—says, “Welcome to the fam.”)

I know today isn’t your actual birthday, but baptism days are birthdays of sorts. They are the day when by God’s grace and mercy, you are claimed as God’s own through Jesus and by the work of the Holy Spirit. Your baptism day is the day where you join a family and a people who have existed across time and space. Your baptism day is a day where you inherit a whole family of “water and Spirit relatives.” On the day of your physical birth, you became blood relatives to a certain family. Today you’ve become water and Spirit relatives to a family as numerous as the stars in the sky. I hate to break it to you, but you now have crazy aunts and uncles from Australia to Alaska, from Uruguay to the United Kingdom, and all places between and beyond, even some right here in Durham. What I’m telling you is, on this baptism birthday, you joined a timeless, global family. This birthday of yours is a cause for celebration, and it’s a cause for remembrance. Those who are present here today celebrate your baptism birthday, and we remember our own baptismal birthdays! Today we celebrate God’s work in you, in each of us, and in all God’s people. Sounds like today should be a party!

I know you can’t read this letter yet, and you don’t understand the words as I’m reading it to you, so I’m counting on your parents or godparents and the rest of the church around you to share the message of this letter with you throughout your life. Perhaps they’ll read this very letter to you, but that’s not what’s most important. What’s most important is that they share the story of God and God’s people with you your whole life long. I trust they’ll tell you of Father Abraham and Mother Mary, of Sister Ruth and Brother Peter, and of so many other siblings who’ve gone before us. And most critically, they’ll tell you about Jesus.

I know they’ll share with you the words written down as scripture and passed along as tradition from generation to generation. With our actions today, your parents and the church have committed to raising you in the story of God and God’s people. Your parents have made a choice on your behalf today that you’ll have to affirm and commit to later in your life at your confirmation and time and again beyond that. Some of us also had others make this choice for us when we were baptized as babies. Some of us made this choice ourselves when we were baptized of our own choosing as adolescents or adults. But whether we were baptized of our own choice or the choice of another person, there is an important fact of baptism that remains the same: God was for us and is for you the primary actor. Even when by our own acts of will we’ve chosen to be baptized or committed our lives to Christ or prayed a prayer for salvation, God’s action was the most significant for our redemption, restoration, reconciliation, and rescue. God’s grace came to each of us first, long before we ever made any move toward God. And the truth is, God’s actions have not only been the most important acts in our individual lives, but they’ve been the most significant actions for all people and all creation throughout history. Now don’t misunderstand me. I’m not

saying our choices don't matter. They do. And your choice to follow Jesus when you're older will be significant. But I am saying our choices don't save us or redeem us or make us part of God's family in Jesus. God's choosing us in Jesus did that for us.

Before I get too carried away in this letter, I want to tell you that I'm relying on our older brother in the faith Isaiah for a lot of what I'm about to share with you. I've found the wisdom and insights provided by our many siblings' writings and stories recorded in the Bible to be vital for understanding who God is and who we are. And the prophet Isaiah speaks to this as well as any of them. I suspect you'll come to find the same thing someday. Of course, when Isaiah was writing, he was speaking to God's chosen people Israel. Israel is God's special people. And Isaiah wrote to them much before Jesus came along to make way for all the people of the world to be part of God's people. So when we learn from Brother Isaiah, we always have to remember he was speaking to other people and to other situations first. Even still, he is sharing something true about who God is and who we are as God's created, formed, redeemed, and called people.

Brother Isaiah, and many of the people who wrote the books that make up the Bible, had a lot to say about the ways God's people had messed up or gone wrong or turned their backs on what God wanted for them. The story of God's relationship with people is full of God being faithful and true to God's love for and commitment to people and people not being true to their love for and commitment to God. So there's a lot of pain and hurt and harm in the story. Really the story of our family of faith isn't suitable for children, but we'll make sure to give it to you appropriately. Yet for all of the pain and harm and violence in the story, the reality of God's redeeming love is what runs deepest through it. So God's messengers like Isaiah often say things like, "but now" in response to the "then" of people's past wrongs and harms and failures to follow God.

Your baptism birthday is a "but now" kind of day. There was a "then" for all of us who were born into this broken world of ours. Yet because of God's work, God is always creating "but now" moments where the tables turn and instead of moving away from God, we move toward God. For those of us who were baptized later in life, perhaps our baptism day felt more like a "but now" time than it does for you. Even still, I expect throughout your life you'll have other "but now" days just like God's people have had over and over throughout history. Maybe yours will always be little turns back toward God because of God's work in you today. Yet regardless of how dramatically you may turn away from God, the truth of God's love for you never changes, and God is always making way for you to have your next "but now" moment.

When you have your future "but now" days—days that remind you of your baptism day—I hope you'll remember what Brother Isaiah said to God's people. He told them that the Lord created, formed, redeemed, and called them. This is true of what God has done for you in your baptism and what God has done for Christ's people, the church, throughout time. I won't write too long about each of these actions of God because there isn't enough room on pages or ink in printers to capture what these words say about who God is and what God has done. But I want to share with you a little about each of them.

First, you should know you were created. We all were created. We are not the creator. We are creatures. Maybe this should be obvious, but a lot of the time we act as if something else were true. I hope I'm wrong about that for you. Brother Isaiah reminds us that God was and is the creator, not only of the whole world, but also of God's particular people, Israel. God brought them into being out of nothing, just as God brought all creation into being out of nothing. Your baptism

birthday remembers that first creation, God's creation of the people of Israel, and the new creation that comes through Jesus. Brother Paul, another one of the people whose writings are in the Bible, says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is new creation!" Your baptism day is a new creation day. Like I said before, our infinitely creative God is the primary actor on this new creation day just as God was the only actor when God created the heavens and the earth. In Jesus, you are God's new creation!

But God didn't only create you. God also formed you. Just as God formed those first humans from the dust of the ground, God has formed you into God's image and likeness and breathed life into you. Yet the forming that God does is not only something of the past. Just as God is ever creating, God is also always forming. Creating and forming are what God does. God is like a potter who shapes and reshapes clay to make it into beautiful and useful pottery. God's always working on us, forming us to be like Jesus. Your baptism birthday is a significant marker of God's forming work in you. But, I must tell you, it is not the day you become a finished product. And that's a good thing! Look how much learning, and growing, and living you have to do. The truth is, even for us who were baptized much older, we also had so much learning and growing and living to do. We still have so much to do. I sure am grateful that God keeps on forming and reforming me. I'm sure someday you'll feel the same.

Brother Isaiah tells us that God creates and forms, and he tells us that God redeems. To be a redeemer was a significant thing in Isaiah's day. A redeemer was a family member or close companion who would pay the ransom or debt for a person who was indebted or even lost their freedom because of what they owed. When God's people had sold out, had given themselves into slavery and bondage through their own wrongdoings and shortcomings and sinful actions, God came to redeem them, to set them free. In baptism, God redeems us. In and through Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, God pays our debts, restores our lives, and sets us free from having to be on our own in the prisons of our own making. Someday this will be especially good news to you, just as it is to all of us who witnessed your baptism. And while God redeemed us once and for all through Jesus, being a redeemer is God's disposition toward you your whole life long. So when your faith waivers, or when you wander or stray or lose your way, or when you've done something you never imagined you would do, God is at work ready to redeem you, restore you, and set you free from any form of bondage you find yourself in.

Because of this, through Brother Isaiah the Lord tells the people not to fear. And I say the same to you: Do not fear. Now, I don't write that lightly. And I'm not saying you won't encounter things that are frightening or fearful. In fact, Brother Isaiah tells us that trials and hardships will come—he calls them waters, rivers, fires and flames. But what makes it possible not to fear in the face of those deathly things, and in the face of all the hardships and challenges of life, is that God will be with you. When the baptismal waters covered your head, you joined a community of faith whom God will never leave, which means you will never be alone. The Lord says to the people, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." God will never leave God's people—you—alone in the midst of hardship or challenge, so do not fear.

As a member of Christ's people, you are created, formed, and redeemed. But that's not all. You are also called. "What are you called?" you may ask. The Lord says, "You are mine." First and foremost, on this day, you are called God's own. Of course, God will call you to all sorts of things. God will call you in service of Jesus. And God will call you in ways general to all who follow Christ and in ways very particular to you. But the most significant thing you will ever be called is God's

own. "You are mine." God says to God's people, and through Jesus to us, "You are mine. You are precious and honored, and I love you." Because of this love, there is nothing God will not do to redeem you, to draw you from any corner of the earth your life takes you, to bring you from the farthest places you could go, to bring you back to God. The truth is, we all need to be reminded that we are God's beloved and more precious than jewels. We all need to hear God say again and again, "I love you." Your baptism today reminds us and as you remember your baptism, it will remind you, that God loves you and all of us so much that God gave God's very own self in Jesus to be with us forever.

Created, Formed, Redeemed, and Called: this is who you are on this baptism birthday of yours, and it's who you will be your whole life long. I hope you won't forget it. It's your water and Spirit family's responsibility to keep reminding you, even as we're reminded that it's true of us, too. God has claimed you, or maybe I should say, God has claimed us, forever. So don't ever forget God's words, "You are mine. You are precious. And I love you."

Your older brother in Christ,

Bruce