

The Rev. Canon Richard Lief  
 Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17;  
 Luke 3:215-17, 21-23

John Chane, retired Bishop of Washington, D.C., and former Dean of our Cathedral of St. Paul in San Diego, often shares this powerful true story. It was related to him by a fellow African bishop, from that bishop's own experience.

As was his usual practice, the African bishop held a retreat for his priests at their humble cathedral. During their quiet time, they were interrupted with a loud crash at the opening of the cathedral doors. Six armed young men not more than eighteen years old had entered the cathedral. The bishop inquired as to what they wanted. The leader said, "We are here to kill you!" Remarkably the bishop said, "May I have a moment of prayer?" "Yes, you may," said the young leader.

The bishop knelt in prayer, and his priests did likewise. He prayed: "Forgive these young men for what they are about to do; Thank you, dear Lord, for allowing me to be your bishop with my priests and in this place; and finally, you have given me life, I now give it back to you."

There was deep silence. And then the young leader said, "I want what you have." He laid down his weapon, as did his fellow would-be assassins.

One might well ask, "What gave the bishop such courage, and presence of mind?" - risky business at best. Things don't always turn out this way. What caused the young leader to respond as he did?

Hear first the wonderful words from the prophet Isaiah echoing the words of the Lord of creation:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you,  
 I have called you by name - you are mine.  
 When you pass through the waters,  
 I will be with you.  
 Because you are precious in my eyes,  
 And honored, and I love you.

We begin with the most basic proclamation: you are precious, honored, and I love you.

This Sunday we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. And our Book of Common Prayer instructs us that this a suitable and appropriate time to have baptisms take place during Sunday worship as the community gathers. Even though no one is to be presented for baptism this morning, it is appropriate that the Baptismal Covenant be used in place of the Nicene Creed on this day.

It first affirms the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as the foundations of our life in Christ. It then goes on to ask us certain questions, which give us a basic and grounded roadmap for living with Jesus. We are called to respond with this phrase; "I will, with God's help." Important point, "...with God's help."

We hear that we are to continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers; we are to persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin, we are repent and return to the Lord.

We are to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ; we are to seek and serve Christ in all persons; we are to strive for peace and justice, respecting the dignity of all people. I will, with God's help. I love you says the Lord. I will, with God's help. With these words, we are baptized into a new life.

We heard in this morning's gospel that it was John, the cousin of Jesus, who was preaching a baptism of repentance. He was a captivating speaker, but he was no megalomaniac. He was the forerunner, preparing the way for one whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. With an intense and passionate hope, John was looking for the Messiah who would bring deliverance for Israel.

John baptized with water. He called for people to repent, to change their way of living, to be more just in their dealings with other people. He looked for the Messiah who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The lowly and the outcast were

in a state of expectation for the coming of the Messiah, and John was the one who was to prepare the way.

And there was Jesus standing on the riverbank, waiting his turn to be baptized. He had been meditating for a long time as he worked as a carpenter in Nazareth to discern his call from God. With John's preaching, Jesus knew this was the time to begin.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John affirm that Jesus was without sin. So why should he be baptized for the remission of his sins. He knew that he wanted to be with his people and baptism for him was a symbol of solidarity. He wanted to make himself at one with his people's needs.

Jesus would not hold himself apart from the world in privileged detachment. He had come to seek and save sinners. This meant that he had to enter fully into the evil world they knew, and pay the price of being there with them. He would walk the road of his Father's purpose, wherever it might lead. Sounds like our African bishop.

Luke has a particular way of describing the baptism of Jesus. He says that Jesus was praying. Prayer is often highlighted in Luke's gospel at certain turning points in his narrative. Prayer also indicates a relationship – Jesus and his Father were on familial terms. Here was the human experience of acceptance, love, and well-being within the family. At our baptism we were accepted into the family of church where we were given an identity and affirmation.

Declarations of love and affirmation are vital to a child's development. Any child who strives to affirm his or her own identity and self-worth without having heard that affirmation from parents faces intense struggles. The voice from heaven, this is my beloved son, is the wonderful sign of relationship, as well as a call to carry out God's mission. It is within this context of prayer that Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descending upon him. And it is this same Holy Spirit that Jesus confers on all who would follow

him. You and I are part of the great human family – each of us is precious, honored and loved of God. That is a given and it cannot be taken away from us, no matter what.

At baptism, we are affirmed in this love. And we are called to live a life that will enhance this love that is ours by living a consecrated life. Yes, we will always need God's help to do this. We have the questions in the baptismal covenant to guide us. They enhance the love of God in which we live and move and have our being. Jesus' baptism and call to live in the Spirit of God is our call as well, as we offer our individual gifts and inclinations for God's purposes.

So what about the African bishop and the young militia leader? What do we see? Forgiveness, thanksgiving, surrender in gratitude - the working of the spirit - a life of consecration and a young man's open heart. The bishop lives in a surrendered consecrated life for Jesus and thus is free from every burden to offer himself so that others may live. He does this only with God's help. And the soldier's heart is touched and changed.

Hymn 707 in our hymnal describes it well.

Take my life, and let it be,  
consecrated Lord to thee;  
Take my moments and my days,  
Let them flow with ceaseless praise.  
Take my hands, and let them move  
At the impulse of thy love;  
Take my heart, it is thine own;  
It shall be thy royal throne.  
Take my voice, and let me sing,  
Always, only, for my King;  
Take my intellect and use,  
Every power as thou shalt chose.  
Take my will, and make it thine;  
It shall be no longer mine.  
Take myself, and I will be  
Ever, only, all for thee.

I pray that I can be like the African bishop, and that I will respond like the young militia leader – with God's help.