

A Spirit of Wisdom
May 21, 2023
Pastor Sarah Wiles

Today we have the joy of celebrating a baptism. If there's anything we do in worship that's more beautiful and renewing than a baptism, I don't know what it is.

When I was a new parent some blessed soul gave me a piece of invaluable advice: when you've got a child on your hands who is completely out of sorts, put them in water.

It's 100% true. Maybe it's because we first took shape in water. Maybe it's because our bodies are more water than anything else. Maybe it's because this blue marble we live on is mostly water, too. Whatever the reason, water renews us, restores us, and reminds us who we really are.

That's an essential part of baptism, too—reminding us who and whose we really are. Our first name is Beloved. Today we get to remember that together.

In the traditional baptismal liturgy, right after a person is baptized, we pray, "Pour out your Holy Spirit upon this child, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence." I love that prayer. Who isn't in need of wisdom and understanding? Counsel and might? Joy?

That prayer echoes today's lectionary reading from Ephesians 1:15-23. Paul writes,

¹⁵ Since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, this is the reason that ¹⁶ I don't stop giving thanks to God for you when I remember you in my prayers.

¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God's call, what is the richness of God's glorious inheritance among believers, ¹⁹ and what is the overwhelming greatness of God's power that is working among us believers.

This power is conferred by the energy of God's powerful strength. ²⁰ God's power was at work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and sat him at God's right side in the heavens,²¹ far above every ruler and authority and power and angelic power, any power that might be named not only now but in the future. ²² God put everything under Christ's feet and made him head of everything in the church, ²³ which is his body. His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way.

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Well, that's hard to follow.

Let's break it down. The first sentence is more or less Paul clearing his throat. He says, you are people marked by your faith and love. That's a pretty great thing to be known for.

You all are like that, too, you know. You're a community marked by love.

When I first began learning about BPC, I had lunch with your interim pastor at the time, Dave Cozad. He told me all about you, all the things he'd enjoyed in his time with you. But what grabbed me and stuck with me is when he said, "This is the kindest congregation I've ever known."

Whoever we are and whatever we're doing here at BPC, we may not be perfect. In fact, I'm sure we're not. I know I'm not. But you are church marked by kindness, by care, by love—love for each other, love that is concrete and enduring, love that overflows to others, love that makes space for new life and love that lasts. That's worth giving thanks for. That's worth continuing to pursue.

Then Paul says, I pray for you. I am always praying for you. The heart of this passage is prayer.

Just like in the baptismal prayer, Paul prays that the Ephesians would be given a spirit of wisdom and revelation, that God will enlighten the eyes of their hearts. We know what the eyes of the heart are. It's not about 20/20 vision. It's the kind of vision where you can look at an open field and see the outline of a house not yet built. It's the kind of vision where you look at your beloved and see their flaws and gifts, and love them all the more.

We need the eyes of our heart to be open, to be enlightened, if we're going to see God's presence, if we're going to see anything that actually matters in this world.

Paul prays they will see three things with their open eyes: that they will see the hope of life with Christ, the history of that life, and the help available in Christ. Hope, history, and help.

It is easy, and reasonable, to feel hopeless or to struggle to have hope. We know ourselves to be broken and flawed. We know people around us are hurting and often hurtful. We know this is true both interpersonally and globally. Given all that, where exactly is there good reason for hope?

Paul prays that the Ephesians will be able to see cause for hope in their life with Christ, that they would not be defeated by the hopelessness of the world, but, with enlightened eyes, would see cause for hope.

It is also easy to feel like there is not enough, to feel like our lives are marked by scarcity—scarcity of money, of time, of energy, or compassion, or ability. And our culture only amplifies this message. There's a particularly poisonous strain of thought that says it's a zero-sum game. If *they*—whoever they may be—get more, I'll get less.

Paul uses the word inheritance in reminding his folks that there is, in fact, an absolute abundance available. I love that because our history in the faith is full of stories of God making a way out of no way. I need that reminder.

And it is easy to feel God is absent, not engaged in our world. We read the Bible and see stories of God parting the waters and making walls come tumbling down. And then we look around and there are no walls tumbling down, except for abandoned buildings; and the waters aren't being parted, they're rising. Where is this power, this help? Is it all a pipe dream?

Paul prays that the Ephesians will have eyes to see God's power at work, and I do think it takes a particular kind of seeing. It helps me to hear your stories of God's power and help. Sometimes it looks like healing after divorce, or love after deep grief, or faith strengthened through, not in spite of, serious doubt. We need the eyes of our heart to be open to see that kind of power and help.

This is Paul's prayer: the hope of life with Christ, the history of that life, and the help available in Christ. I don't know about you, but some days, I really need that prayer.

When we baptize, we baptize into the vision of that hope, that history, and that help.

And then Paul tells the Ephesians the trust on which this prayer rests, where he finds his own hope, history, and help: God's power. Specifically, God's power in Christ.

Now, as Christians who come after Constantine, particularly Christians in what is arguably the most powerful nation in the world, we have to be careful when we start talking about God's power. Because, according to the gospel, it is nothing like our ideas of power.

The Bible says God's power is like foolishness. It's the kind of power that comes as a helpless, naked newborn. It's the kind of power that has nowhere to lay its head. It's the kind of power that dies at the hands of the powers of the world. It's the kind of power that is best made known in being poured out.

In other words, it's love. This, Paul believes, is the ultimate power. This is what will overcome the world. In the baptismal liturgy, we reject the powers of this world and instead place our trust in the power of love poured out. This is where our hope comes from. This is what our history is. And this is the help and power available to us each and every day of our lives.

Remember: your true name is Beloved. For love you were made. In love we live. And by love we are saved.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023