

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

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Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Psalm 29:1-4, 9-10; Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3:13-17

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We have to reclaim the truth that we are God's chosen ones..., urges Henri Nouwen in his beautiful book, *Life of the Beloved*.

Little did I dream when I volunteered to minister to incarcerated women that I would witness first hand in such desolate surroundings countless inmates who believe and act out of this truth. Many, when asked "How are you today?" claim with a radiant smile, "I'm blessed." There is Maria, who, with compassion, bolsters the spirits of her bunkie whose case appears hopeless when she herself is facing a similar fate. I have been present when the women in a pod rejoice exuberantly with one of their number who is released unexpectedly. An inmate will invite me with her companions to form a circle and pray for the needs of all. Leticia mentors her young bunkie, helping her to cope as she awaits nervously her upcoming trial. All of these women demonstrate to me in a profound way what it means to be beloved of God, chosen and empowered to spread the good news of Christ's kingdom as it exists in a place of confinement.

What a tender moment it must have been for Jesus when the Father's voice was heard announcing to all gathered at the Jordan River that day, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Isaiah's prophecy takes that message even further: Jesus is "servant," sent to carry out his mission in obedience to the Father's will; he is empowered by the "spirit" to be a "light" and to "bring forth justice to the nations." Emerging from the water at that moment, the sinless one is aware that he now carries on his shoulders the sins of all. He is prepared to embark on the road that will afford him countless opportunities to "open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness." This road will lead eventually to the suffering and death that will redeem all who have strayed and finally to the glorious Resurrection that holds within it the promise of eternal life for all.

Today as the Church brings the Christmas season to a close, she urges me to be mindful of the tender moment of my own Baptism. As the cleansing water flowed over me, I was chosen as the "beloved daughter" to follow the same path that Jesus took, to be empowered by the same Spirit, to announce the same good news that Jesus preached. Can I believe that what I witness in my jail ministry is possible anywhere on this earth if you and I embrace as our own the truth that we are God's beloved? May Nouwen's words be our continuing reminder:

Long before any human being saw us, we are seen by God's loving eyes. Long before anyone heard us cry or laugh, we are heard by our God who is all ears for us. Long before any person spoke to us in this world, we are spoken to by the voice of eternal love. Our preciousness, uniqueness and individuality are...given to us...by the One who has chosen us with an everlasting love, a love that existed from all eternity and will last through all eternity.