

***“May God’s hand be upon you!”***

**January 13, 2008,**

*Text: Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17*

I.

We have a special service of worship this morning around the Baptism of the *Hernandez* family: **Santiago**, the husband and father, and the siblings, **Rocky, Luis and Victoria**. I’ve never baptized four adult members of a family before.

And for me ... and for our church ... as well as for the four of you, it’s a powerful experience. In a sense, I wish we were gathered at the river, on the shores of the river waters, and could do the Baptism right there, the way John the Baptist baptized in biblical times ... the way Jesus himself was baptized by John in the River Jordan.

Of course, such river baptisms were baptisms of immersion, which is the *biblical way*. They were also, what we call, *believers’ Baptisms*, which is what we’ll be doing here this morning ... where the *believer* makes a profession of Christian faith.

Baptism is a foundational event in the life of the Church. It’s the way we enter into the Christian life, and the Christian Church that seeks to nurture and enrich that life.

In our tradition, there’s always a distinction between *the Church and the world* ... and *the life of the spirit and the life of the body, or the flesh*. These distinctions are made by Paul in his Christian writings again and again.

What makes Baptism foundational in the Church is that it hinges on a personal decision rooted in our freedom as a human being. Much of the *preaching* in the evangelical wing of the Christian Church is for *decisions*.

The preacher wants the people—usually referring to the *unbaptized*—to make a decision for Christ (that’s the language they use), which means to make a decision about a particular way of life; namely, the way of life lived by Jesus—all the way to the cross, which, if we take it seriously, has everything to do with *suffering/ sacrificial love*.

The Christian life, therefore, is a life of compassion and forgiveness, a life of welcoming, inclusive love.

II.

And so in Mark’s gospel, which is the first of the four gospels, **John the Baptist** appears in the wilderness—right way, in verse four—**proclaiming a baptism of repentance**. It’s a baptism of repentance **for the forgiveness of sins**.

And what's amazing about this *baptism of repentance* is that people flocked out to him and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

It's perhaps helpful to think of *repentance* as a *turning*—a *turning* toward God ... which is a *turning* away from the drum beat of the world—a *turning* away from a life rooted too much in *looking out for #1* ... and *upward mobility* ...

... to the point of obsessing on *more of this* and *more of that*: more money, more money, more money; or more power and status, more position and influence—none of which are intrinsically bad, but all of which can easily nudge us off track in our spiritual walk with God.

Because at the end of the day, our lives are not about our stuff—our possessions, our investment riches etc., etc.; our lives are about our relationships, our family and friends ... and the love and commitment that bonds us together.

Our *repentance* may also be a *turning* away from a life of poor decisions ... a life where one decision after another leads us down the wrong path.

In this *turning*, and in our Baptism, we're reminded that *our failures don't have to be endings*. Hey, sometimes we get on the wrong track, a track of misdirection where sin is clearly in control of our spirit.

No doubt, some of us have known periods of life where we know we've floundered, and we haven't been at our best; where we haven't like ourselves much; where—to tell the truth—we've been a HUGE disappointment to ourselves.

But again, these times of our lives ... these periods of darkness ... *they don't have to be endings*.

### III.

In our baptism, we're reborn, given a clean slate; the spirit comes, in the water and in the mystery of the ceremony, and it invites us to a new beginning and a new life.

When we're baptized, we give our lives to the *way of Jesus*. It's a *turning*, a *turning* to God. There are not words to describe the magnitude of this turning.

It's a *turning* of our spirit, our soul, the essence and core of our being—a *turning* toward God and toward the *way* of God's Christ.

You see, Jesus became God's Christ. It was God's action, God's life in Jesus the human person (human just like you and me) that filled Jesus with God's spirit and led Jesus in the *way of sacrificial love* and, ultimately, to the cross. In our Baptism, we're drawn toward that life.

Our reading from **Isaiah 42** this morning includes (in the first four verses) the first of four *servant songs* that are part of Second Isaiah's preaching. These *servant songs* were symbolic of the radical change that was taking place in Israel's self-awareness. In and beyond Exile, there was a new humility that had risen up in her spirit.

If we think about, how could it have been otherwise? Off in Exile, Israel had lost everything. Jerusalem had been destroyed, along with the temple. Her king had been humiliated and banished off to Babylon as well. For Israel as a nation, and for Judaism as a religion to survive and carry on posed an enormous challenge.

And thus it was that *God's hand was upon Israel* as a new consciousness was being born. And at the core of the consciousness was this *turning ... a turning away from worldly values ... away from a life of self-centeredness and me first, me first* in everything.

A *turning* to a life of love and compassion for every human person and every nation; and in this *turning*, Israel became a *light to the nations*. In the BIG PICTURE of things, this is God's will for all of us ... and, along the way, *God will not let us go*.

#### IV.

There's a poignant scene in the **award-winning movie, *Dr. Zhivago***. The Comrade General is talking to Tanya who, somehow, running through the city, in the upheaval of revolution (chaos everywhere) had become lost.

*How did you come to be lost?* The Comrade General asks. She replies, *Well, I was just lost.*

He asks again, *No, but how did it happen? How did you get lost?*

Tanya doesn't know what to say. So she adds, *I was just lost. My father and I were running through the city and it was on fire. The revolution had come and we were trying to escape and I was lost.*

More emphatically, the Comrade General, asks one more time, *How did you come to be lost? What happened?*

Tanya still doesn't want to say but, finally, she says, *We were running through the city and my father let go of my hand ...and I was lost.* Then she added, mournfully, *He let go.* This is what she didn't want to admit.

The Comrade General then said, *This is what I've been trying to tell you, Tanya. Komarov was not your real father. Zhivago is your real father and I can promise you, that if your real father, Zhivago, had been there, he would not have let go of your hand.*

In the same way, friends, God doesn't let go ... of any of us. We may have done stuff along the way. We may have messed up ... sometimes, even messed up big-time ... still, God does NOT let go.

Again, can we hear this? ***Our failures don't have to be endings.***

## V.

How many of you remember your Baptism? Many of you, no doubt, don't remember, for you were baptized as infants.

When we're baptized, we're given a new body and a new spirit—the body and spirit of the *new creation*. Our Baptism is also a *naming*. We are *named* and *consecrated* as God's hand comes upon us.

In our baptism, we renounce the power of evil in the world. We make a commitment for a new direction, whatever that means for our individual lives.

Baptism is an enduring sign of promise and hope.

1. It is the promise that God, the giver of life, stands with us in our baptism having promised us new life.
2. And it is the hope that this same God, in our baptism, has a claim on our life.

As a sacrament, Baptism is an outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible grace. In our Baptism, we're drawn into the *body of Christ* that is the Church. When the baptismal waters pour over us, we're invited to live in the *new creation* to which God calls us in Christ.

## VI.

And so, we gather today at the *Baptismal font*, preparing to pass the baptismal waters over these four members of the **Hernandez** family. To each of you (pointing to the Hernandez family), **May God's hand be upon you.**

1. in your coming and your going ... *may God's hand be upon you ...*
2. in the endless challenges that await you ... *may God's hand be upon you ...*
3. when the sound of temptation comes at you—out of the blue—with no warning, *may God's hand be upon you ...*

And may you walk always in the abundance of God's grace and love!

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz

Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*

6701 Miami Lakeway South

Miami Lakes, FL 33014

On the web at [www.mlchurch.com](http://www.mlchurch.com)