

Not Going Back

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Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, and Boris Yeltsin survived a shipwreck and washed up on a deserted island. One day, they discover a genie, who offers each of them one wish since they found the genie together.

First, Blair speaks up. “I’ve been stuck here for two years, so I wish to return home to my family in England.” The genie nods, grants it, and poof! Blair vanishes in a puff of smoke.

Next, Clinton steps forward. “I’ve been here two years too, so I wish to go back to my beloved in America.” Poof, he’s gone.

Finally, Boris Yeltsin, who had passed out drunk on island-brewed vodka and just woke up groggily, rubs his eyes and mumbles, “Where are my friends? I’m feeling lonely here, so I wish my two buddies were back with me!”

Yeltsin couldn’t let go of his companions; he pulled them right back into isolation for his own sake, not for theirs. But today, on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, our scriptures flip that story upside down. God’s grace doesn’t drag us back to old divisions or darkness. Instead, it thrusts us forward into light, especially for Gentiles like us, shattering every barrier. Once we’ve tasted that new reality, there’s no going back.

Let’s dive into Acts 10:34-43. Peter stands before Cornelius, a Gentile Roman centurion, and declares, *“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him”* (vv. 34-35). Peter grew up in a world where Gentiles, outsiders like Romans or even us today, were unclean, untouchable. You wouldn’t share a meal with them, let alone imagine their salvation. As one of Jesus’ closest disciples, Peter still carried those deep cultural prejudices, like chains he didn’t even notice.

But everything changes at Cornelius’s house. Peter shares the good news: God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, who went about doing good and healing all oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

They put him to death by hanging on a tree, but God raised him on the third day, showing him to witnesses commanded to preach to everyone who believes, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name. Suddenly, the Holy Spirit falls on these Gentiles—tongues of fire, praises in unknown languages. No prerequisites, no partiality. Peter’s eyes open: God’s grace is for everyone.

This is Peter’s “not going back” moment. He can’t retreat to a narrow faith that says, “God is for us Jews only.” For us in this United Methodist congregation, mostly seasoned saints in person, with online friends tuning in, baptism echoes this. We’re not just recommitting to our local pews; we’re plunged into a global, diverse body of Christ. No turning back to isolation or “us versus them.” God’s light shines for every nation, every face on our screens or streets. Compare translations for depth: The NIV says God “accepts people from every nation”; the ESV emphasizes “no partiality”; The Message puts it plainly, “God plays no favorites!” Each nuance underscores grace’s wide reach; light for Gentiles, breaking every chain.

Now turn to Isaiah 42:1-9, a prophetic portrait of the Servant, ultimately Jesus at his baptism. *“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out”* (vv. 1-3). This isn’t a warrior Messiah thundering power; it’s gentle justice, sustaining the weary, faithful to all the earth.

God, the Creator who stretches out the heavens, spreads out the earth and what comes from it, gives breath to its people, says: *“I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness”* (vv. 6-7). The climax hits: *“See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you”* (v. 9).

At Jesus' baptism, heaven rips open, the Spirit descends like a dove, and the voice affirms, "*This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased*" (Matthew 3:17). No going back to the carpenter's quiet life in Nazareth; he steps into public ministry, toward the cross and empty tomb. For Gentiles, we outsiders from a Jewish lens, this is dazzling grace. Jews longed for a forceful savior; Jesus humbled himself, baptized by John, who felt unworthy to untie his sandals, then humbled further to a criminal's cross. Through that lowly path, he saved not just Israel, but all the world's peoples. Once brought from darkness into this light, why return? Baptism is our exit ramp from "former things": greed, division, blindness into God's new dawn.

In United Methodist tradition, we recognize one baptism for the forgiveness of sins: an indelible mark, a permanent seal of grace. It's not repeatable because it's irreversible. Jesus didn't emerge from the Jordan hesitating; he launched into healing, teaching, facing the powers. We, too, in our baptisms, died to the old self and rose renewed—no retreat to comfortable routines or "normal" church as it once was.

Peter couldn't unsee the Spirit on Cornelius; those flames burned away prejudice forever. Isaiah's Servant doesn't flicker out; the light endures. Here in Cheltenham, with our close-knit group, we feel the pull of "going back" to fuller pews of yesteryear, simpler days without screens or struggles. But the Spirit never moves backward. Baptized people don't pine for the *status quo*; we press toward where God stirs now: welcoming the newcomer, praying for the world, serving with gentle hands. Baptism declares it plainly: "I died here and was reborn. A clean break with the past."

Friends, we're witnessing a troubling return to worlds ruled by power's harsh logic: echoes of the World Wars era, when greed and might divided nations, crushed the vulnerable, prioritized "us" over "them." Forces clash with armed might, authorities turn guns on the innocent, leaders abandon shared global tables for isolated thrones of self-interest. It tempts us to nostalgia for old ways, but those "former things" led to dungeons of despair.

Jesus shattered that script. Crowds craved a Messiah of force; he chose humility, baptized by humble John, dying the death of the forsaken, for Jews awaiting him and Gentiles like us, outsiders in their eyes. Peter, steeped in a culture where Gentiles were too unclean for dinner, met Cornelius and broke free. No more limits; salvation for all.

Those who forsake peace and love cannot be God's instruments. False messiahs peddle power to divide and dominate: a regression to darkness. Jesus' path? Forward: grace as unquenchable light, justice that lifts the bruised, inclusion for every nation. Today, we choose: power's old road, or Christ's humble forward march? As baptized believers, we declare: Not going back!

Stay awake, church! Don't sleepwalk into yesterday. Do what we must: pray without ceasing for blinded leaders chasing greed, strangers locked in modern dungeons, nations teetering on division's edge. Our small flock isn't powerless; we shine as light-bearers. Visit the lonely elder next door, message the online seeker, advocate for the oppressed. Prayer awakens us, propels us into ministry for the world.

We're not going back to being "just another neighborhood group." We are God's Beloved, marked by water and Spirit. Not retreating to worlds of endless "us versus them," but stepping into Christ's borderless body. Peter proclaimed peace through Jesus, Lord of all. Isaiah's Servant frees every captive. Today, renew your vows: reject partiality, embrace the new.

May our Lord pour divine grace anew upon us.

May the Creator awaken us to the light that shines for all peoples, Gentile, neighbor, stranger alike.

May the Spirit send us forward as faithful instruments of justice and love, never turning back.

Go forth, baptized ones, not going back, but carrying Christ's light to the nations. Amen.