

“Baggage Claim”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 12, 2025 - Baptism of the Lord

[Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)

Baggage: We all have some. It may be designed to look sleek and stylish, it may be rugged and durable, it may be built for ease of transport, it may have special security features, or it may allow for maximum storage capacity. Our baggage may be expensive or hand-me-down, fancy or plain, it may be beautiful or downright ugly. Baggage comes in all shapes and sizes, and though the baggage that you possess may be different from the baggage that others in this room carry, we are all united in having some.

And our differing kinds of baggage are not just of the kind that we use to tote our belongings around in while traveling. We all also possess differing kinds of metaphorical baggage, the personal stuff we presently carry around in our hearts and minds and bodies that comes from past failures, losses, or other painful experiences. Some of this baggage can so weigh us down as we attempt to carry it through life, that we feel as though we can't move because of it and we are stuck. And it is easy to wonder if anyone would ever even want to travel life's journey with us because of the heavy and oftentimes ugly loads we bear.

The good news that we share is that baggage-handling help is available for each of us. We are not condemned to carrying our baggage alone or to being stuck or crushed because of it, for the One who lovingly created us also lovingly cares for us as beloved children, no matter the baggage we carry.

The good news of our faith is that, because God cares, God experienced our common lot by taking human flesh in a humble child of Mary, taking on the baggage of humanity and showing us how to live with our own.

Today's gospel reading from Luke tells of one baggage-handling strategy used by Jesus in his baptism. According to the gospel, Jesus was around 30 years old when he came to his kinsman John to be baptized by him in the waters of the Jordan River. And Jesus came along with many others to experience John's baptism of repentance, which involved of being submerged, going under the water in a symbolic death and burial of one way of being, thinking, or doing, so as

to rise out of the water as a new creature, unburdened by older ways and set free to live in new, God-pleasing ways. For Jesus, he left behind the burden of being the craftsman from Nazareth and took on a new vocation as a healer and teacher, and he let go of the baggage of his past life to begin his new journey as the ministering Messiah.

We can learn a lesson from Jesus our teacher as we consider our own lives. Those of us who were baptized in the Christian faith, whether as a child, young person, or adult, all received in our baptism a new identity as a Christ-follower, and we remember our own baptism into this new way of being when we gather here and participate in the baptism of others or remember the story of Jesus' baptism as we do today. When reminded of the watery symbolic act that we or a parent chose for us, we can rededicate ourselves to living into that new identity and commit ourselves anew to letting go of the baggage that hinders our forward movement on the journey.

More good news for us today is that God helps us to do this. God claims us as beloved children, no matter the ugliness of the baggage we carry, and God helps us not just by claiming our baggage-laden selves, but by helping us to deal with our baggage, for we believe that God has not only come to us in Christ, but has come to us and is present with us on every step of our journey as a Holy Spirit, a divine fire that purifies us, an animating breath that enlivens us, a great wind that fills our sails and empowers our movement forward, and a heavenly dove that rests upon us and gives us peace.

God provides these helps for us oftentimes by working through others. Maybe you have been helped to deal with your baggage by the kind words of a friend, or the wisdom of a good counselor, or even the knowledge of others who have developed medicines and other therapies. Perhaps others have aided you in finding wholeness through spiritual practices such as guided meditation or Reiki. I hope that you have all felt lifted up and supported by this faith community as we pray for one another and include each other in fellowship.

I also hope that you can recognize how God can work *through* you to help others, either by providing kind words, a healing touch, or a peaceful presence, and that God can work through you in unique ways precisely because of your unique life experiences. *Because* of the baggage you have carried in life, you can be more

aware of and sensitive to the pain of others, you can be more compassionate and understanding, you can be more willing to engage in life-giving work for others. In this way, your baggage can be a gift. Claim it!

Friends, as God calls you beloved, no matter who you are or where you've been on life's journey, and God works through you, just as you are, with your shortcomings and history of brokenness, may your burden today be lightened, and may you be filled with hope for even brighter days to come. Amen.