

**January 10, 2010**

**The Baptism of Our Lord C**

**Texts:** *Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

### ***IDENTITY AND PURPOSE***

Of all of the many privileges and responsibilities that I have had as a parish pastor in my twenty-seven years of parish ministry, some of the most enjoyable and fulfilling moments have occurred when I had the privilege of presiding over someone's baptism. The overwhelming majority of baptisms have involved infants or young children. However, from time to time I will have an opportunity to baptize individuals like the three high school students that presented themselves for baptism last year at Christ the Lord in Elgin.

Baptism is not something that we take lightly as Lutherans. In an ELCA document titled *The Use of the Means of Grace: a Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*, we read these words:

*In Holy Baptism the Triune God delivers us from the forces of evil, puts our sinful self to death, gives us new birth, adopts us as children, and makes us members of the body of Christ, the Church. Holy Baptism is received by faith alone.*  
*(The Use of the Means of Grace, Principle 14)*

*By water and the Word in Baptism, we are liberated from sin and death by being joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Baptism God seals us by the Holy Spirit and marks us with the cross of Christ forever. Baptism inaugurates a life of discipleship in the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism conforms us to the death and resurrection of Christ precisely so that we repent and receive forgiveness, love our neighbors, suffer for the sake of the Gospel, and witness to Christ.*  
*(The Use of the Means of Grace, Background 14a)*

No matter who the person is that is being baptized, and no matter how young or old the person is, there are certain things that are a natural part of the baptismal process. One essential element of baptism is the **preparation**. There are dates to schedule, forms to be filled out and pastoral calls to make. We need to make sure that the items of baptism, such as the water, the oil, the candle and baptismal napkin are all ready to go.

Another essential element is **education**. If the baptismal candidate is a child, then the time is set aside with the parents and sponsors to discuss the meaning of baptism and

the promises they are making on behalf of the child. If the person being baptized is an adult, then there must be time set aside to discuss the meaning of baptism and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The third essential part of the baptismal process is the *rite* of baptism. There are words to be said and actions to be performed. There is the sign of the cross, the pouring of water, the anointing with oil, the presentation of the baptismal candle, and the introduction of the newly baptized to the congregation. These simple actions have deep and symbolic meaning when the presiding minister speaks the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The common, ordinary water, when combined with the extraordinary words of Christ, make the baptismal event a sacramental moment in our lives.

Some of you perhaps imagine that all of these things, the preparation, the education, the words and the actions, are all similar to the way this ritual was performed in the baptism of Jesus, which we remember today. However, when we read the four gospel accounts, none mention anything about a preparation process. They say nothing about any educational process. Nor do they go into any detail about the actual rite of baptism, except to say that the baptism occurs in the Jordan River. Luke, and the other gospel writers, show us a baptism that is different in many ways from our own baptisms.

The first difference we recognize in this story is that the baptism of Jesus occurs when he is an adult. Tradition has it that he was around thirty years old. Mary and Joseph were not expected to bring their child for baptism during his first year of life. For baptism was not a typical part of Jewish custom. Parents did bring their young children to the temple for a presentation ceremony and for a naming and circumcision. But baptism itself was more a ritual used by prophets to symbolize the act of repentance.

The second difference we may recognize is that Jesus is not the center of attention in this account of his baptism, at least not in the beginning. Luke suggests that many people are baptized that day. So the action of baptism is not what is important to Luke as he tells the story. Rather, it is what happens immediately after the baptism that causes the event to be memorable and justifies our celebrating it today.

We are told by Luke that after the baptism Jesus began to pray and as he is praying the heavens open up and the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove. A voice comes down from heaven that says, “You are my son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

For Luke and the other gospel writers, there are two things that happen to make this event so significant. The first is that there is a public designation or identification of who Jesus is: “You are my Son, my beloved.” These words are not accidental, or coincidental. These are the words which make clear that this man named Jesus is God’s chosen one. He is God’s son, and he has come into this world with a purpose.

The second significant aspect of this baptismal event is that it initiates the public ministry of Jesus. Jesus will go out to reveal his identity and purpose to all the world through his words and his actions. The lessons we read throughout the Epiphany season are designed to give us a glimpse of this identity and his mission. But here, in the waters of the Jordan, the ministry begins with a sign of empowerment as he receives the Holy Spirit and the words of blessing from his heavenly Father.

So when we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, we celebrate or acknowledge two things. The first is the **identity** of Jesus: he is God’s beloved Son. The second is the **mission** of Jesus: he came to bring God’s love and salvation to all the people of the world.

Now we move from the story of the Baptism of Jesus to the story of our own baptism. When you and I were baptized through water and word, we too were given a new identity. We declare that identity very clearly in the baptismal liturgy when the pastor says, “Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Through baptism we become children of God. There will be no identity more important to us than that, to be called children of God.

And when we were baptized, we were also given a mission. We claim this purpose at the very end of our baptismal liturgy when we say these words, “*Through Baptism, God has made us members of the priesthood we all share in Christ Jesus, that we may*

*proclaim the praise of God and bear his creative and redeeming Word to all the world.”*

Our purpose as baptized children of God, then, is to in praise of God and to proclaim God's word to the entire world. It is an awesome responsibility. But it is a responsibility that comes along with the privilege of being Children of God.

Martin Luther once said that we should remember our baptisms every day. By this he means that we should daily remind ourselves of who we are, what our identity is, and what our purpose, or mission is.

So today, on Baptism of our Lord Sunday, it is a good day to remember our Baptism. It is a good day to reacquaint ourselves with our identity as children of God. It is a good day to reclaim our purpose and mission as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.