

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 43:1-7
SECOND LESSON: Acts 8:14-17
THE GOSPEL: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 13, 2019

“Affirmation of Baptism”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Lowell D. Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace and peace and truth of the love of Christ be to you now and forever. Amen

Church fathers and mothers tried to change something, and we use the term affirmation of baptism, it's in the hymnals. Affirmation of baptism is what we do when youth are around 13 or 14 years old, and they affirm what God has done. As much as we tried, nobody wanted to change the word, because the word we use is *confirmation*, right? Many of us have gone through that experience. So my idea today, whether you think of your confirmation as an affirmation of baptism, or as you think of each and every day as your affirmation of baptism, that's what I am hoping, is that the joy of living as a baptized child of God is the most important identity forever for every one of us. I don't care about political identity, I don't care about sports identity, I don't care too much about where you have lived. I am interested, but the thing that unites us is our baptismal identity. I would hope that we could have more fun in our baptismal identity, it would be just as much fun as we have with other identities that we cheer on. In fact, it would be a source of this. I am looking for an epiphany that things become more clear, just as the star lead the wise men, God's love becomes more clear during this season.

Christian author, Frederick Buechner expressed this about listening to your life. I like the idea of listening to your life in a baptismal frame. He said it this way and he has written many great books, “If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I am trying to say, both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this. Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is, in the boredom and pain of it no less than the excitement and gladness. Touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis, all moments are key moments and life itself is grace. The grace of the Father's heart in Jesus Christ.” So baptism is a way of looking at life to remember the promises God has made. The Isaiah text picks up on the themes. “Do not fear, I have redeemed you, I have you by name, you are mine and when you pass through the waters I will be with you.” That's an understanding of our baptismal identity.

I just wanted to reestablish something. I am really thankful that we baptize children, babies. I had a Baptist friend, he said, “That's really cute, you guys go ahead and baptize the way you do and we'll baptize the way God does.” But our theology matches, right? Which is, how much do we bring to this relationship? The answer for our righteousness is – zero. This is all God's work. So what is more precious than the precious child? That's why we have the

affirmation as we are young adults and maybe perhaps older. Dare I say it this way? An affirmation each and every day. My encouragement is anytime that water hits you, whether a shower or you are washing your face is to remember who you are, a child of God. That water, as simple and plain as it is, it's the water and God's word, God's promise.

I want to amplify this, that this question – if you ever get asked this question – When were you born again? Have you ever been asked that? That used to be a little bit more of a lead question from some of our evangelical friends, the answer for you is – When I was baptized. Let's just go over that understanding of your identity. Obviously God the Father, the Creator, the Water, the Word, and obviously your life, the people around you, the dear family and sponsors that surrounded you in your baptism, that is beautiful. But Jesus Christ, we baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son. I used to have some challenges with my confirmation students. Let's see if I can dust off your memory of confirmation.

This is very deep, it's not just the cleansing, but it's actually the drowning of the old self, with Jesus' death. We are one with Jesus in death. I used to say it to the kids this way, "You have already died, you have nothing to fear." I kind of miss it, I have to admit, the living chemistry experiment known as middle school. You have 6-foot tall young women and 5-foot tall guys and everything, and something called hormones flowing, it is just really fun. I just remember the kids going, "I have already died?" Yes, spiritually you have already with Christ, not alone, but with Christ, have died. Then we baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and as the Holy Spirit resurrected Jesus Christ, you are now resurrected to new life. You have been born again. So it is in our baptism, that's your answer. Some people won't like that, but I'm really thankful for that answer. God's gift of grace, do not forget it.

Sometimes people ask, "Why was Jesus baptized?" I would just say that if we got Pastor Gary and Pastor Lowell and Pastor Chuck, if we tried to answer that question we would have six opinions, and wouldn't come out with an agreement. I will just say this, in the Matthew text, Jesus says it this way because John was saying "Why should I baptize you?" "Let it be so now for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." I can't overly explain that. I have this simple understanding. Jesus was part of this, I want to be part of it too. This was a gift that God gave us, it is a gift that too often looks more like an entrance requirement. I know that we struggle with that. At least I struggle as a pastor about that, but it is meant to be, something that you can hang on to in the midst of thick and thin in your life.

This understanding of commitment comes from God's love and then allows us to share it. So all the other identity politics that are going on and separation from each other, just virulent talk throughout social media and through broadcast media, it's time for us as baptized people to reclaim this agenda that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. So it is difficult to be the baptized because it has to do with common, everyday living. It is the most wonderful supernatural experience, and yet it is lived out in the incarnation, the daily slog of stuff. Maybe you remember this in your confirmation. Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy baptism to live among God's faithful people? Do you remember that one?

If you don't, that's the first one. Living amongst God's faithful people, that's hard work, isn't it? We have these mountaintop experiences and then we struggle.

I just wanted to say to you that last year, even though I was just here for this last quarter, I am so thankful to God for American Lutheran Church, and to be able to use this word "slog" through it. When I came it was a time of disorientation because of the financial challenges. Can you believe that by the end of the year that things have been set at least in a new balance? In fact, it was better than that because somebody gave a special one-time gift, so we finished \$100,000 ahead. Isn't that amazing?

I just want to comment briefly, it's a little dangerous for a pastor to speak of the Gospel and a budget, but you have one who is going to try. It kind of goes like this. I am so thankful for our church because if you don't care about budgets at all, I just want to lift up a couple things. It's this thing about living amongst God's faithful people. I am so proud of the Council under Marty's leadership, talking and trying to understand the budgets, and negotiating, and discerning what was right. So next year's budget, I like it a lot, because it relies nothing on special gifts to fund the ministry. It's all our offerings and even the offerings are a little bit less, so it is a conservative budget that way. We are not trying to say we are going to increase it 50 percent, although I would definitely take that, Lord. Don't let me stop you, it's just a budget. The pennies from heaven are so helpful, but we are not relying upon that to fund the ministry, so any time a special gift comes in, we will reduce the debt or we will set up new reserves to pay for the equipment we know that someday will fail. We will strengthen our ministry that way.

So thankful for all the programs, including Wednesday Night Alive, of balancing their income and their expenses for the benefit of our community. Women's Ministry and Stephen's Ministry – all these wonderful things. The staff – I just want to publicly thank them for this commitment to live amongst the baptized because there is no pay increase. That doesn't affect me, I just came lately, but for people who have been here, really I want you as a congregation to think of it this way – that's like a \$10,000 offering that the staff just made. No increase, and to me, whose normal 2% or something that is going on, I'm not sure what Social Security will be this year, but whatever, I guess what I am trying to say is that I am thankful for our staff to stay with us. The operational budget has been shorn down and I just want to mention two other things. Publicity has been really shrunk, so that means that it's you and me spreading the good news of this church out there. We still have a little bit of media, but we are the publicity, we are the ones that are responsible for this. I want to give thanks for Tom's leadership, but there is no money for outside people to come in, we are going to utilize the incredible talent of the people within this congregation this year. It is amazing. Can you believe that this budget we slogged through incorporates the entire principle and interest on the debt payment? It is all imbedded, we can do it. And we can do these things.

I just want to give thanks to God, hopefully I didn't take too much off the good news of God's love, but that is what it means to live amongst the baptized is to slog through. What I mean

by that is it is not always pretty, but it is based upon this because we do it when we hear his word and share in the supper and then we are freed up to proclaim the good news of God and Christ in word and deed, and to serve all people following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ and to strengthen and to strive for justice and peace through all the earth. I pray to God that this year of our baptismal identity leads to a tremendous stability, and then on. Next year, 2020. I have this code word – 2020 vision, leading up to our 50th anniversary in 2025. Let's work together as the people of God, living amongst and working with each other.

My last encouragement for you is this. You have the Holy Spirit in your life. Next week, I get to speak about spiritual gifts and the spirit's tremendous diversity, look amongst us, this tremendous diversity of spiritual gifts that we have, but do not forget – in your baptismal identity that you have the Holy Spirit as your guide, your comforter, your encourager. I love laying hands on the young confirmands, perhaps you remember when your pastor did it for you. Sometimes I have seen group blessings, but doggone it, I went to every single one of them. I laid hands on every single one of them and to strengthen them in their faith through this.

We ask that we continue to strengthen each person with the Holy Spirit, and daily increase in your gifts of grace, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of council and might, the spirit of knowledge, and spirit of the Lord, and the spirit of joy in your presence now and forever. Through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord. Amen I love that blessing, do you remember that experience? If you don't, that's what I want to end with. This phrase, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased." is for you and for me in our baptism. I could preach a whole sermon on just this, all of us struggling to find blessing in our life, striving for perhaps parents' approval or other people's outside approval. You have God's approval inside, this is inside out living.

I want to give a shout out to Pastor Otto. I knew him in his last three months of his life, but he was still able to communicate the Gospel to me, even though his illness had taken away his voice and he was in circumstances that were trying, because he had inside out living. That's me, a short way to say baptismal living. I have got God's love, the Holy Spirit, and I am reborn. I don't care what tries to constrain me, I'm going to share the good news. He was able to do that. Thanks be to God. That's what I want for your life, the joy of having an identity, an eternal identity. An identity that cannot be constrained by external forces, but allows us to strive for justice and peace. Simple thing – next time you shower, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I am loved, God loves me. Washing your hands in the morning, washing your face, it is as simple and as beautiful as that during the day.

My last comment is this – the world is short of blessings, would you please go out there and share a blessing with your family, that you love them, that you are pleased with them, that you are honored with them, and we carry this message forward. I give thanks to God that our identity at American Lutheran Church is based upon our baptismal identity. In Jesus name. Amen.