

Baptism of Our Lord January 13 2019

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I have no recollection of my baptism. But I do know what happened there because I saw them in church growing up. I know that the baptismal font would have been lowered from the ceiling by the organist with the flip of a switch, descending from the heights above the chancel. I know that the water used was from the Jordan River, left over from the previous baptism. I know that the pastor would have held me and sprinkled my head with the water. That my parents would have stood by with my sister. Watching. I know that I had the mark of the cross made on my forehead in oil, and that I heard the words, "Brian, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."

In the main, that is what has happened with baptism from the very beginning of the Christian church. A washing in water, in a special place, with faithful people watching. A marking with oil and the sign of the cross. A welcome into a new reality.

Baptism, this strange washing in water that Christians point to as having deep meaning in our lives and our faith. What is it, really? How do we think about it? Perhaps more importantly, how ought we to think about it?

Our reading from Luke shows us two main things about what baptism is and does.

First- Baptism brings identity. In fact, it is our primary identity! Jesus in the Gospel of Luke certainly knows who he is prior to this. We heard that a couple of weeks ago in the gospel about Jesus in the Temple, "Didn't you know I must be in

my Father's house?" But it is in that prayer after the washing in water that Jesus and the crowd see the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove and hear the voice that give him his identity- "You are my Son, beloved, the one in whom I am well pleased." It is this identity that Jesus lives out of. It is from that identity that he can tell Satan to take a hike. It is that identity that shapes and guides how he treats people, who he eats with, the words he says. It will lead him into danger and even to death. But that identity also means that he will be the resurrected one.

Our baptism, gives us our identity, "child of God".

What a great gift to be given! How many of you struggled to figure out who you were in your teen years? Or even beyond? But, the core of that identity is already given to us. When that dove shaped font rose back up into the rafters at St. Mark's in Charlotte, I knew from that moment on that not only was I Brian, son of Jean and Jim, a Middleswarth. But that I was also Brian, child of God. Claimed and sealed by God and God's love. And I was reminded of that identity each time we went to church as a family. Each time mom read bible stories to me as a child. Each time we prayed before bed and at meals. As faith permeated every aspect of our lives as family. Because of that identity.

So even when I struggled in those years to figure out what being Brian Middleswarth child of God meant in particular. I had a foundation that if nothing else gave me confidence in knowing what I was not!

Second, baptism reminds us that it is God who acts, not us. It is God who claims us in baptism. Jesus did nothing to ask for God's presence in the Holy Spirit. To speak that claim on his life. It was a gift, freely given.

This is why we as Lutherans practice infant baptism, because what can a child do to earn God's love and grace? Nothing! All babies do is pee, poop, puke, and eat and drink so they can do the other three. In bringing an infant to the font, we proclaim the wonderful mystery that God comes to us, claims us as God's child, loves us!

What a powerful statement, especially in our society, where it seems that our worth is tied into what we do. What we bring to the table. What school you went to. What grades you get. How much work you produce. How much you earn. What your family is like.

Baptism reminds us that it is God who comes to us. Who claims us, even before we can think about choosing God. This is different from some of our Calvinist siblings, who focus on the response and our agency. God's grace, in their case, is more like a blank check that still needs us to sign and cash it. This is believers baptism, we make the choice for God.

Infant baptism reminds us that all we can really do is receive the gift of God's grace and live into the identity we are given. We do not do anything but be who we are. I cannot be anything but a Middleswarth, something that I have not chosen but that was given to me. In the same way, I cannot be anything but claimed child of God. Something given to me.

Baptism give us our identity, the one that shapes all others. And it reminds us that it is God who comes to us. God always comes to us. As the text says, "Where can I go where you are not. I go to the highest mountain...you are there. I go to the deepest depth...you are there also. " or as Paul says, "Neither height

nor depth, nor things past nor things to come...nothing can separate us from the love of God.”

We also believe a third thing that is most important, that our baptism is an ever present reality. That it is something that continues to be available to us. To remind us of our identity.

Martin Luther put it this way in a sermon on this day in 1534

Whoever is in sin, stick them in the baptism[al water], and their sin will be extinguished. Whoever is in death, stick them in the baptism[al water], and death will be swallowed up. For baptism has divine power, the power to break sin and death. That’s why we are baptized. If later we fall into error or sin, we have not thereby demolished our baptism; we return to it, and say, “God has baptized me, plunged me into the baptism[al water] of his Son, of the Father and the Holy Spirit. There I return, and I trust that my baptism will take away my sin—not for my sake, but for the sake of the man Christ, who instituted it.”

As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we understand that any time we are around and in water, we are reminded of our identity. Of who we are; claimed child of God, made a saint by God through the waters of this baptism. And by returning to that claiming, that promised identity, we shed those other things that come upon us. When you are reminded that you are beloved child of God, chosen by God. You cannot be sinner anymore. That’s not who you are. That’s not your identity.

Pastor Dan Erlander often talks about Lutherans as “living wet” because we carry our baptism around with us such that we are constantly dripping the water from

it on those around us. We are so shaped by this identity that it pervades everything we do.

We have been given this wonderful gift. To be chosen as children of God. Claimed by God. Made new in these waters, made a saint. Loved beyond even what our parents can give.

Does this identity shape your life? Does it seep into everything you do?

It is never too late to return to these waters, remind yourself who and whose you are, and live in that identity. And if this is an identity that you do not have yet. It is never too late to receive it. To feel the water on your head and to hear those words.

This is why we place the font where it is. These are the waters we pass through to come to the table. Placed here to remind us of God's claim on us, even as we come to the table to be reminded that in the death and resurrection of Jesus we too have died and been raised. That our identity is of beloved children, even as we are fed for the forgiveness of sin and strengthening in faith.

On this Baptism of Our Lord Sunday may we all be reminded of who we are- Child of God. Claimed by God in love. And go forth this day to live in the ever-present reality of that claiming.