

Baptism of our Lord January 10 2021

Mark 1:4-11

The idea of ritual washing or even submersion was not unknown to the Jews. But this thing John was doing on the edge of the wilderness was something... different.

It took place in the River Jordan, the last boundary that the Israelites had to cross to enter into the Promised Land. One that when crossed put them into a new relationship with the God who had guided their wandering through the wilderness for 40 years. To whom they owed, everything.

It was a washing that changed the very way those who participated in it thought. A washing that cleansed not only the body but the soul, a forgiveness of the ways in which they had missed the mark in their relationship to God and one another. This was unique, for normally sin was only forgiven through sacrifice at the altar. Here, it came through a submersion in the waters of the river. A rising up out of the water and into a new relationship with God. One that was different from just a few moments before.

Something happened that day, after Jesus approached his cousin John to baptize him, after he had been lowered into these waters that were the gateway to the promised land, when Jesus came up out of the water something happened in him. Something so powerful it drove him into the very wilderness his ancestors wandered for 40 days; to fast and pray and struggle. This event was so significant in the life of Jesus that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all attest to it.

As significant as that baptism of Jesus was, the baptism into Jesus that we practice is even more so. A baptism that is not just symbolic for what it means but effective in what it does.

This baptism into Jesus has power beyond cleaning the body. We hear this witnessed to by John himself, “I baptize with water...he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” We see this difference in our reading in Acts- the Holy Spirit comes only with baptism in the name of Jesus.

What is baptism?

Baptism is more than just an entrance rite into the Christian faith. You can see the truth of this in Paul’s encounter with the people in Ephesus. John’s baptism holds no power, but the one in Jesus’ name does. For it is through this baptism that they finally receive the Holy Spirit.

Baptism, in the name of the Triune God as commanded by Jesus at the end of the gospel of Matthew, is about death and resurrection. Because in these waters all those things competing for us, seeking to define us, the sin and greed that arise in us, those other forces trying to claim us, are all drowned and when we come up out of the waters, we are different people.

Baptism gives us our identity.

I love how the Rev. Dr. David Lose puts it, “Baptism grants us an unassailable identity (as well). Whereas so much else in our life describes us – our occupation, our race and ethnicity, our gender and sexuality, our life experiences both good and bad, our passions and interests and commitments – our status as God’s beloved children defines us. It’s not that these other things don’t matter. They

do! But it's that none of these things is as important as our identity as God's beloved child."

When those other things become more important. When we identify as Trump's or Biden's, as Democrat or Republican, when we divide ourselves into camps we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. We cover over the truth of who we are and whose we are and dishonor the one who so loved the world and all who reside within it that he was willing to die so that we might live.

As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we believe that baptism, among other important things, gives us our identity. We believe that in this dying and rising, this claiming of us by God through the Holy Spirit, that we are made children of God, that we are drawn into relationship with others as siblings in Christ and that nothing can change that. That is real. That is fact. That is truth.

For us, baptism is not a once and done event, but an ongoing reality. One that shapes our understanding of who we are, what we do, and how we live. Martin Luther believed that baptism is a calling into a vocation- one of service to the neighbor. One that means loving others with the same commitment that God in Jesus has loved us.

As a child, I lived in the neighborhood pool during the summer, Fairmeadows Swim Club. I loved it because as someone who was big for their age (even then) it was a place where I felt...light. I could move easily and quickly as we played because the water buoyed me up.

The waters of baptism, buoy our lives. They free us from all that weighs us down. Our fears, what other people think of us, our uncertainties, the trials of life. All

are gone, for in these waters of baptism we have the certainty that the God of the universe, who created all that exists, has claimed us as God's own beloved child. And if God says something is so, it is so... "Let there be light!" This is in no small part why we, as Christians who happen to be Lutheran, baptize children, who can do nothing on their own. This action is God's own doing, not ours.

Martin Luther, in those moments of deepest doubt about what he was doing, in those moments when his own sin threatened to overwhelm him, found his only salvation in this identity, this claim, I am a baptized child of God.

That identity freed him from that doubt, with the understanding that even if he got it all horribly wrong, God would still love His child. That identity freed Luther to do difficult things to proclaim the love of God in Jesus Christ, because in the end he knew that the only identity that mattered was the one given to him by God. As one claimed by God.

We have a challenge today, my friends. In our nation and in our church. The challenge is one of identity. Our own and that of those who live with us in this nation and who are part of this body of Christ that is the church.

Do we frame our identity as child of God, claimed by God through the waters of baptism? By those waters freed from the oppression of sin, death, and all the forces that seek to defy God. If so, then we are committed to seeing others as made in the image of God and deserving of love and respect for that reason. As worthy of being listened to, cared about, attended to. We are committed to keeping the 8th commandment and seeing what others do in the best possible light. We are committed to seeing others as God's beloved children, too.

Even when we don't want to. Even when we feel they don't deserve it.

Even when they are different from us in those ways that describe who they are but do not define who they are.

Even when they screw things up royally.

We are at a moment in the history where the question for the citizens of this country is, "Can you differ with another person on important issues and still see this person as an American?" And for Christians the task and calling is even greater: "Can you see someone who differs from you on important issues as a fellow child of God?"

How we answer those questions, both individually and corporately will determine the course of our country and the church for decades to come.

It is a daunting and difficult task. Made even more so by sin, death, and all those forces that defy God. Racism, classism, sexism, the desire to get even, to raise ourselves up by putting others down.

I have seen people of deep faith struggle with this answer because of the lived experience they have had with others. Struggled not so much whether to see them as fellow Americans or children of God, but whether to be in relationship with them.

But I am convinced that it is the enemy, the forces that defy God, that delight in this rupture in relationship. For then it becomes easier for them to do their work.

I am a student of history, you can see the result of this work throughout time. The pogroms against Jews that periodically swept Medieval Europe, the same

stereotypes and lack of relationship that led to the Holocaust and the death of millions of Jews.

The balkanization of identity that led to the Civil War. That led to a fractured church that delighted in persecuting each other.

There is much prayer, and conversation, and difficult work to do my friends.

And we will fall short of God's desire for us in how we regard and treat one another, for the power of sin clings to us despite this baptism... the symptoms lasting long after we are claimed.

But we have the most powerful medicine in the world- the love of God in Jesus Christ. We have the best balm in the universe, the waters of baptism. Ones to cool our passions, to wash away all that blinds our sight, to remind us of our identity, as God's beloved children. Our vocation through that identity to love others as God has loved us.

We have the meal of Christ's own body and blood. Given and shed for you, for each and every one of you.

And in this Meal and in these waters we receive grace upon grace, and the strength to try again. To try and love one another in deed and truth. To live our identity as beloved children of God.

My friends, remember our new year's resolution and repeat after me, "I am a baptized child of God, deserving of love and respect, and God will use me to change the world."

May it be so.