

## **Baptism of Our Lord January 7, 2024**

**Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11**

Have you ever jumped into a body of water after a long, hot day? Or into a hot shower after a sweaty day of dirty work outside or extended physical activity? What did that feel like? How did you feel when you came out?

Somehow, those experiences were different from other times when you have jumped into the pool or the lake. When you have taken a shower at the end of the day or the beginning of a new one. It's the same act but imbued with different meaning by the circumstances.

What John was doing was not unknown to the Jews. For them his baptism was a washing that symbolized a changing of the mind. A cleansing from sin. Stepping into a new moment of life. While it wasn't just your regular getting ready for school bath, it also wasn't that unique experience of entering into the waters.

For those coming out to John, the message he brought them was something they needed. While the whole people of Jerusalem and of the Southern Kingdom of Judah did not actually come out to John, it's obvious that he was a rock star! His was the hottest ticket, like for Taylor Swift's Era's tour. Costumed to evoke the image of Elijah, the prophet who was to have returned to prepare the way for the Messiah, John called people to repent. To change their thinking and acting. To turn from the pursuit of those things that did not provoke love of God and love of neighbor. And there seemed to be a hunger for that.

But, when everyone began to think John was all that and a bag of chips, he very clearly demurred. I'm just giving you the equivalent of a daily bath, he said. The one coming after me, he will give you a plunge in the lake after a hot day!

The adult Jesus then comes to John and is baptized. But his. is a bit different. As he comes up out of the water, Jesus sees the heavens ripped in two (the language used will be heard again to describe the ripping of the curtain in the Temple in two at the moment of his death). The spirit of God descends upon him in the form of a dove. And a voice from heaven claims Jesus, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Whatever happened, this experience at baptism was enough to drive Jesus into the wilderness. A time apart for soul searching, prayer, reflection. A time that he will return from and begin his ministry. This washing, changed his life.

Baptism, this ritual washing, has been important/essential to Christians from the beginning of the church. Jesus commands his followers at the end of Matthew to go into the world and baptize people in the name of the Triune God. In Acts 2, Peter calls on people to repent, be baptized in the name of Jesus and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And this bath has been an important entrance rite, transformative moment, ritual since then.

We do this bath because Jesus did it. We do it because he said, do this... in the name of the God who is Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Because in these waters we too see the heavens split in two and the Spirit descends upon us. Because we hear a voice, which sometimes sounds like the pastor, calling us a beloved child of God with whom God is well pleased.

We as Christians who happen to be Lutheran practice infant baptism. Because it emphasizes the fact that this is all about God's action and activity... not ours. That even faith is a gift given to us by God.

We believe this because we worship the God who created all that exists. Who ordered the chaos of the waters in the beginning and who we believe can order the chaos of our lives. Who can speak faith into being in us just as surely as God spoke the sun, moon, and stars into being. Who in calling us beloved children, makes that so.

I believe deeply in this understanding that baptism is God's action towards us. That it is something wholly significant and different from all other baths. As one author put it: "Baptism is no human plaything but is instituted by God himself. . . We are not to regard it as an indifferent matter, then, like putting on a new red coat."

This bath, which Luther would have preferred to be a full dunking, is also not a once and done event. Rather, it is effective on the daily lives of us as followers of Christ. It provides us with our core identity. As the Rev. Dr. David Lose puts it, "Baptism grants us an unassailable identity... 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." Everything else creates the uniqueness of who we are. But that core claim is our identity.

Every day we wake up and regardless of what the day before was like, we arise as beloved child of God. Claimed by God. Beloved of God. Fearfully and wonderfully made by God. We know this- because in the name of that God we had a bath and received an anointing.

The cleansing encounter we have with that God who speaks to us in the waters, who comes down upon us as the dove, who pulls us into his own death and resurrection as Jesus. This encounter is not once and done but an ongoing reality that we can access at any time. It is not just a washing, but a transformative event. One that leaves us different from who and what we were before.

For in these waters we leave behind the old Adam, the old Eve, who trust ourselves and our judgment above God's. Who believes that we can truly know good from evil. Through these waters we are reborn, every time we dip into them. Reborn children of God. A new Adam, a new Eve, trusting ourselves to the one who came down as a child, who lived as a man, who died and the was raised so that we might have life that truly is life.

All of this is God's activity.

And...

I wonder if there is not something to the movement of our siblings in Christ who practice what is called believers baptism. Not that it is our "decision" that makes baptism efficacious- then our salvation depends on us in a very real way.

Rather, I wonder if their understanding takes seriously the human need to be fully invested in something.

It is the difference between being chosen on the playground to be on the team and actually trying out for the wrestling team, or football, or volleyball. One is totally in the hands of another. The best we can do is show up, let it be known, I'd be willing to play in the next game. The other takes definitive action on our part- complete the forms, go through the drills, commit to the process. The decision is still not ours, coach decides, but we are committed to the process. Willing to follow it wherever it may lead.

To understand that what happens here is not some participation trophy. Divine fire insurance. Something you do to make grandma happy.

Rather, it is something we commit ourselves, our lives to, with the same passion and focus as we do our sports, our jobs, our hobbies.

That is what, at its best, affirmation of baptism is. An affirmative action on our part to engage with the reality that already exists. That we have been claimed as beloved children. We have been chosen for the team. And that we are going to play as the player that God has made us.

This is not what saves us from ourselves. But it is what brings us to the full experience of our faith. To make full use of the gift of baptism.

Every year we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. And for the last seven years we have pondered this wonderful gift of baptism that has been given to us. One that we regularly remember in worship- as we did today and will do throughout the season after Epiphany.

I would invite you during this season, to, as you come to receive communion, or before you leave, or as you come in, to come and dip your fingers into the waters

of the font. To trace that sign of the cross on your forehead, and to remind yourself, I am a baptized child of God. Beloved by God. Chosen by God.

I would invite you to do that same thing each morning as you get ready for school or work. As you wash your face, brush your teeth, take a shower. To take a moment, trace that sign of the cross, and remind yourself of your identity.

Beloved child of God. To do that with your children as they go to sleep, Remember you are a beloved child of God. God loves you and so do I.

To try this practice for the next month, and see how it affects you. Does it change how you live, work, play? Does it affect your attitude about yourself? About others.

We begin this new year with the baptism of new beginnings. For in these waters we have not only been transformed but are daily made new. Reminded of this truth- you are a beloved child of God, fearfully and wonderfully made. Thanks be to God.