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Baptism of Our Lord - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

01/13/2019

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 21Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Let us pray,

Amen.

The Water of Life

Good morning! I'm blowing my cover with this one, but here we go. If you go to a high school built in the last 30 years you'll notice that the building is usually somewhere off by itself, with only a few entrances, and locked doors. Now this wasn't always the case, as I'm sure a lot of you remember. My high school in Martins Ferry, Ohio was built in the 1930's and reflected a time much different than what we see now. The building was in the middle of town and off the top of my head I can think of at least 10 different entrances. We were also able to leave for lunch, and so every day my friends and I went to the Wendy's across town to sample the 99 cent menu.

We had roughly 20-25 minutes for lunch and after twice a year something special happened: the theater dept. put on a play. When this happened the play would start directly after lunch. You were supposed to go to your sixth period class and then that class would go down to the play. It was a great time for everyone, it was an even greater time for me and my friends, who just never went back to school after lunch, and instead would go and see what kind of shenanigans we could get into "out in the country," as we called it. We'd go off roading, or maybe drive my friend's old Ford Escort to fast on dirt roads. Sometimes we would go hiking, or just relax at Justin's pool. One time, as we drove around in the middle of no-where we came across an old quarry pit that was full of water. Being the irrational teenagers that we were, two of us decided to take a swim. It was my friend Justin, Josh, and myself. Justin decided to not

participate since we didn't have swim suits but that never stopped someone like Josh and I so in our underwear we went, seeing who could swim the fastest to the other side.

There was only one problem... Josh and I weren't very good swimmers. Sure, we had spent a lot of our time in the summer in the water but we had never really tried to swim a great distance. About 1/3 of the way our energy starting flagging, and at the halfway point it was clear that the only race was to see if we could survive the short swim. We had never really been confronted with this type of problem before and so there was a pretty long period of time where I was genuinely worried I was going to drown. We laughed it off, but I know Josh and I were both afraid. We eventually realized that if you just turn over you float, so we did that for awhile to get our energy back before swimming the rest of the length, crawling up the shore, and collapsing in the mud on the other side. We laughed and laughed but for a short period of time, as we three teenagers, all alone in some massive desolate area, spent unsupervised time together, that water felt like it might take our lives.

Has your life ever felt like that? Adrift in some strange experience that seemed like a good idea at the time, only to be confronted by the tidal wave of thoughtlessness that got you into the mess? Writers and poets often use the image of a ship or the sea as a metaphor for our lives. It's where things like "two ships passing in the night," or the "stormy seas of life" come from.

But within our lives, another story of water has also been woven. The word sealed might be a more appropriate example. In the waters of our baptisms we were marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit forever. In the Gospel reading today we see the short story

of another man's baptism, one a little more unique than ours, for as Jesus prays something unique happens:

“The heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

Nothing that special happened at my baptism, in fact, until a few months ago I didn't even know the exact date of when my baptism occurred! Every congregation has some sort of record they keep for when a pastor performs a baptism. I jokingly call it the “Book of Life” here at St. Paul's, and for most people, the date of their baptism is something they never really need to know... unless you go into seminary. When you fill out the pages and pages of forms throughout seminary the ELCA will often ask you what is the date of your baptism. Unfortunately, the pastor that baptized me must have forgotten the date and several months later simply wrote “September, 1987.” It wasn't until my mom found the candle from my baptism when they moved that I found out the actual date: September 20th. It was a monumentally important experience in my life and compared to God's activity in the text, it was just a normal Sunday morning.

Now all of this got me thinking about the chaos of our lives, and how insane things can feel, especially in our society now. I began to wonder if the groups of people who were flocking to the Jordan river 2,000 years ago to be baptized by John were in a similar situation. For many, they felt that those in power didn't care about what the average Jane or Joe had to say about what happened. 2,000 years ago the concern was staying in control, keeping a hold of the power. Today, it might feel like it's about getting re-elected, which sounds a lot like keeping ahold of the power to me.

And so the masses abandoned the system, fleeing to the wilderness searching for some sort of sign of hope... and what do they see? The Holy Spirit, descending like a dove, and a voice announcing wonderful news. It's that voice from above that got me thinking. The translation you have before you is from the New Revised Standard Version, which is usually pretty good, but another translation, the New English Translation, puts that response differently: *"You are my one dear Son; in you I take great delight."*¹ And it has this interesting little note at the bottom that reads *"The force of agaphtos is often 'pertaining to one who is the only one of his or her class, but at the same time is particularly loved and cherished.'"*²

Now, here is what I found so comforting. I doubt that at any of our baptisms a voice from heaven opened up with words like this, but in some ways, we are also beloved and uniquely special to God. In our baptisms God has called us by our name, continually loving us beyond anything we could have hoped or imagined. And who is this God? I'm glad you asked!

"1But now thus says the Lord,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

2When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

¹ Luke 3:22b (NET)

²<https://bible.org/netbible/>

and the flame shall not consume you.

3For I am the Lord your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

I give Egypt as your ransom,

Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

4Because you are precious in my sight,

and honored, and I love you,

I give people in return for you,

nations in exchange for your life.

5Do not fear, for I am with you;

I will bring your offspring from the east,

and from the west I will gather you;

6I will say to the north, "Give them up,"

and to the south, "Do not withhold;

bring my sons from far away

and my daughters from the end of the earth—

7everyone who is called by my name,

whom I created for my glory,

whom I formed and made."³

³Isaiah 43:1-7 NRSV

Sure, things can feel crazy. But God has loved you since the dawn of time, you are God's beloved, too! And that is certainly good news... Amen.