

1st Sunday after Epiphany C
January 10, 2010
Hymns: 297 - 89 - 294 - 299

LUKE 3:15-17, 21, 22 (slide 1 with reading)
JESUS' BAPTISM AND OURS
***Baptism and God's Family.**
***Baptism and New Life.**
***Baptism and God's Claim on Us.**

Through Baptism – may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all! Amen!

Dear Baptized Children of God,

Returning home from church one Sunday where a man had been baptized by immersion, a little girl asked, “Daddy, why did the pastor push that guy under the water? Why, daddy?” The mom tried to answer her question, but the little girl, named Rena, just wouldn’t be satisfied. Later that night husband and his wife tried to provide an answer from a perspective that a child’s mind could comprehend. They talked about sin. They explained that in the water of Baptism Jesus washes people from sin. When they come out of the water “clean,” it means they are going to try to be “good” from then on. Rena thought about this for a moment and responded, “Why didn’t the Preacher just spank him?”

Good question! I wonder if it would make more of an impact on adults being baptized if we spanked them when they became part of the body of Christ. If it were up to some people, that’s probably what we would do. It’s important for us to know that the water of Baptism communicates grace, no matter whether the person is infant or adult. Sometimes we can’t be so sure what spanking communicates. Know this however - one of the meanings of water in Baptism is the washing away of sins, and, yes, we hope people will straighten out and be good after their Baptism. But Baptism is much more than first meets the eye in being made clean from our sins. After all, Christ had no sin and yet He asked John to baptize Him.

(slide 2) Baptism is our entrance into Christ’s family. We become brothers and sisters to Christ and become heirs to God’s Kingdom through Baptism. One way to look at Baptism is as an initiation into the family of Christ. John was a fiery preacher, a preacher of righteousness and repentance. But at Jesus’ Baptism, something somewhat tender and touching happened. When Jesus was baptized, Luke tells us, *“heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”* That is such a wonderful verse.

Luke doesn’t tell us whether other people besides Jesus heard God’s voice that day or not. But it is a beautiful scene. Jesus is baptized and His Father God tells Him how proud He is of Him. It’s good when any parent says, “I’m proud of you,” to a child. In the 1980 Winter Olympic Games the US hockey team beat the Russians. It was an incredible feat. During the final game of those Olympics against Finland, the ABC cameras started following different stories. Jim Craig, the goalie, was very close to his father. His mother had recently died, which made the two men even closer. And the cameras would show [Jim] in action, and his dad cheering.

When the US team won the game, the celebration was unbelievable. Players embraced, fans were going wild, but Jim Craig wasn’t celebrating. He was near the stands, looking like a lost little kid . . . and then we read his lips: ‘Where’s my dad?’ he asked. ‘Where’s my dad?’ Craig finally found his dad, and the celebration was complete. They embraced, they cried, and they remembered the years of practice, the years of playing, the years of drills, the years of discipline, the years of bonding between child and parents, who gave up much of their lives for practices, games, and the expense of the sport. They remembered the woman they both loved, a wife for one, a mother for the other. For Jim Craig, such a moment demanded the presence of his father.

This is a very special moment in Luke’s Gospel when Jesus is baptized and *“a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”* Why shouldn’t the Father be pleased with His Son Jesus?! Jesus had lived a perfectly holy life up to this point. Jesus’ holiness would continue throughout those next and last three years on this earth as well! You and I are far from perfect. We are sinners. Still every child needs to hear a message of love and acceptance from a parent. The Father was giving His personal blessing to Jesus’ mission for a world of sinners. In Baptism Jesus was anointed with power from the Holy Spirit for His work as the Christ.

But here is what should be most heartening to us: Because Jesus’ perfect righteousness is credited to us in Baptism, God also speaks a similar blessing over you and me, who have been baptized! We read **in I John 3**

these words, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”

Baptism tells us who we are. We are children of God. At our Baptism there was an unheard voice from heaven saying, “This is my son, this is my daughter, whom I love.” “You are My beloved and on you My favor rests” is what God says to each one who is baptized. We have an identity and a birthright given to us by the One Who created and loves us. This blessing and essential birthright is hard to hear above all the other voices of our lives, the voices that shout, ‘You are no good, you are worthless, you are ugly, nobody cares about you.’”

Somebody does care about us. God cares. Let no one tell you that your life doesn’t matter. That you are no good, worthless, ugly, that nobody cares. You have been baptized. You are a child of God. You are a brother or sister of Christ. You have been brought into His family. There is a church that schedules a “Mom’s Night Out,” with free babysitting for single mothers who need a night off or mothers who simply want to spend an evening with their husbands. The pastor’s own wife once happily took advantage of this program to go out to dinner with her husband.

Later, when the pastor went to pick up their three-year-old son, the babysitter told him about one of the games they had played. She had asked each of the preschoolers what was mommy’s favorite thing to do with them. “You know what your son answered?” said the babysitter. “He said that mommy’s favorite thing is to ‘clean me up.’” “In truth,” said the pastor the next Sunday, “that isn’t Susan’s favorite thing to do with her son. Cleaning him up is an excuse to hold him. Absorbing the mess is just part of the process of getting close. And it’s the same with God.” In Baptism, Jesus “absorbs our mess of sin and cleans us up!” Baptism says that God yearns to hug us close to Himself. We are God’s own children.

But there is a second thing we need to see. **(slide 3) Baptism offers us the opportunity for a new life.** Here is another place where the water of baptism is important. Not only are you and I washed clean in Baptism - We are given new birth – We are born again of the Spirit! And with that new birth there is an opportunity for a new life in Christ. Do you understand the water of Baptism is to be a powerful force in our lives? When the water was applied to us in Baptism [as an infant or as an adult] something powerful was taking place. The Holy Spirit was taking up a special residence in our lives. As such, we became God’s agents in our family and in our community. As we ponder our own Baptism, it might cause us to ask, “Am I being all that God created me to be? I know I am blessed of God, but am I living a life of significance?”

Have you ever noticed in some really tall buildings--skyscrapers, if you will--beside the elevator doors, there are often mirrors? Well, apparently, some years ago, there were a lot of complaints about the time that people spent waiting for elevators. And the higher the buildings grew, the more the problem existed. So engineers were called in to try to speed up the elevators or to see if new elevators could be added in the shafts that they had, but there seemed to be absolutely no solution to this problem at all. They spent a lot of money on their consulting fees, until someone spoke up and said, “Let’s fix this with mirrors.” “What do you mean, fix it with mirrors?”

“Well,” the person shrugging his shoulders, “the problem really isn’t the speed of the elevators or the number of elevators in the building, the real problem is in the minds of the people who are waiting for the elevators. So he suggested, “Let’s give them something to do. What do people like to do most?” Oh, they like to look at themselves in the mirror! “How can we enable them to do this?” they asked. And the answer? “Put mirrors all the way around, and the time will just fly by.” And sure enough, they did it. And the time flies by. Friends, I bet most of you did not know that was why mirrors are all around elevators! You have been had!

Let me ask you a question: how much time do you spend looking in mirrors--looking at yourself--and how much time do you spend looking out around you, considering the spiritual and physical needs of others and society? That’s a simple way of asking, are you simply existing --living a life centered in self-- or are you living a life of significance? This is an appropriate question to ask at the beginning of another new year. God has called us to join Him in “reconciling the world unto Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Baptism reminds us that we are God’s children. Baptism offers us the opportunity for a new life, a life of purpose, a life of significance.

And one thing more. **(slide 4) Baptism reminds us that God has made a claim on us.** A young man in a church returned home from his first year at college. He appeared at his pastor’s office to tell him that he would not be at church while he was home over the summer. When the pastor asked why, the young man

said, "Well, you see, I have been doing a lot of thinking about religion while I was at college, and I have come to the conclusion that there is not much to this religion thing. I found out I don't need the church to get by."

To the young man's surprise, the pastor remained very calm and responded by saying that he found all this very interesting. "Aren't you worried?" the young man asked. "I thought you would go through the roof when I told you that!" The pastor had known this boy for about five years, had baptized him a couple of years ago, and watched him grow during his high school years. He came from a difficult family situation. The church had been very interested in him and members had a hand in helping him to go to college.

"No," the pastor responded. "I am interested in what you said, and I'll be watching to see if you can pull it off." "What do you mean, 'pull it off'?" the young man huffed. "I'm nineteen, I can decide to do anything I want to do!" "Yes, I thought the same thing when I was nineteen," replied the pastor. "What I'm saying is, I'm not so sure you will be able to get away with this." "Why not?" the young man asked.

"Well, for one thing," said the pastor, "you are baptized." "So, what's that have to do with anything?" "It means that there are people here who care about you. They made promises to God when you were baptized. You try not showing up around here this summer, and they will be nosing around: asking you what you are doing with your life; what kind of grades you made last semester; what you're doing with yourself. And then, there is also God. You see, no telling what God might try to do with you. From what I've seen of God, once He has claimed you, you don't get off the hook so easily. God is relentless in claiming what is God's. And, in Baptism, God says you belong to Him. You need only be Baptized once. God's grace and promise in the Sacrament are good for eternity! We can be unfaithful and blow it all in, but God is faithful."

The boy shook his head in wonder at this strange unreasonable brand of reasoning and more or less stumbled out the door of the study. In a week or so, he was back at his usual place in the second pew. The Holy Spirit had done His work!

"A voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'" That was the voice of God at Jesus' baptism. But it could have been your Baptism. It could just as well have been at my Baptism. We are part of God's family. As such we are part of God's kingdom. We belong to God. Wherever we go, whatever we do, God is there with us. There is no more important statement about our lives than this: We have been baptized! Amen!

May God the Holy Spirit, Who has begun His good work in you through Baptism, carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.