

SERMON
Baptism of Our Lord
January 10, 2010

Isaiah 43:1-7
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

“I am the LORD, that is my name”. These words were spoken by the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel near the end of their period of exile in Babylon. Isaiah later goes on to say;

“But 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.” So what’s in a name? What does it mean to be called by God and redeemed? Who are we, really?

On a beautiful sunny day, a young man and his father drove onto a plot of land that they were considering purchasing. After the proper surveying was done, they climbed back into the car.

When it started to sputter the young man climbed out to look under the hood. He discovered that his engine was overheating. Suddenly the front of the car ignited and the young man was in flames.

The father quickly jumped out of the car, grabbed a blanket from the back seat and wrapped it around his son putting out the flames. “You’ll be alright son”, the father said. His son, grasping for breath said; “please don’t let me live, I am already dead.”

The son lived, but he was correct in a sense when he said: “I am already dead.” What he meant was that his identity, everything that made up who he was; this handsome, outgoing, athletic young man was permanently gone. He literally had no face. And despite years of surgery, people would still turn away from him upon their first glance.

To find some peace with this tragedy, this young man changed his name and moved to a different part of the country.

So, what’s in a name? Everything, if we base our identity on God’s calling. You see, God’s naming goes deeper than our outward appearance. In our first reading Isaiah speaks to God’s chosen people who were in exile.

Later on, Isaiah will remind them that they were called and named as God’s chosen people and that God was about to bring them home. These people were a struggling community of faith with little or no hope.

Listen again carefully to God’s promise to the Israelites: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. I will be with you... For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you...”

What a glorious message! A message that gives comfort and is full of hope. And did you happen to notice that the Israelites did nothing to deserve this great promise. If anything, they had turned their backs on God. Even so, God decides to act on behalf of His people. God is the initiator, not the Israelites.

God is the one who comes to the prophet Isaiah with words of hope. God is the one who comes to Israel in one of their most depressed, vulnerable moments. God is the one who comes to them when they feel down and out and ready to give up all hope.

God is the one who comes and picks them up again, and reminds them of their true identity and self-worth.

God comes and acts in a beautiful, living, affirming way. God assures them that they have not been forgotten; that they are indeed loved by God; that they belong to God. And they shall be restored and delivered out of their exile by God. What a wonderful message of hope!

There is the story of a man who bought an old pipe organ which had been magnificent in its day. But now it was dilapidated, banged up, and hardly played at all any more. So he called in experts from all over the world, hoping that they could restore the organ.

When they had finished, the organ looked like new. The little angels were shiny and clean; the ornamental carved leaves had smooth curves and corners. The blotchy varnish had been stripped and restored.

The only problem was that the insides of the organ were sitting in boxes on the floor. The outside looked beautiful, but the organ could not be played. The owner continued to advertise for organ experts to fix and restore his prized musical instrument. But no one could.

Then one day, a little old man who was half blind knocked on the door inquiring about the organ. The Butler laughed at him saying, "What makes you think you can fix this organ? We've had experts here from all over the world."

But the owner overheard the conversation and told the Butler to let him in. He figured that it wouldn't hurt to give the old man a try.

After several days, the little old man had the organ operating like new. The sound was magnificent as if it was music from the angels in heaven. When asked how he could do this, the old man replied, "I made this organ."

“I made it... I made you... I have redeemed you... I have called you by name... I love you... you are mine...” That is what God says and does for us. And that is our true source of hope and deliverance both now and in the future.

The maker of the organ was the one who could best restore it and give it new life. Likewise, God who made each and every one of us is the only one who can truly fix, restore and give new life to you and me.

It doesn't matter how down and lost we may feel. It doesn't matter how much we have messed up our lives. It doesn't matter what kind of condition we are currently in. God, the one who created us, can, and does, lift us up and deliver us from all of our forms of exile.

And that is what happens in Holy Baptism. When we are baptized, God initiates a relationship. God says, “You are mine, and I will never let you go. I created you and I will love you for all eternity.” For in baptism, God claims us.

We do this same thing in our lives. Think of a time when you have claimed someone or something. For instance, have you ever lost a pet and had to go to the pound to claim it? Imagine walking amongst a sea of cages seeing hundreds of dogs and cats.

Finally, you see yours – your precious little puppy. “There, that's mine!” you scream. And the puppy sees you and runs towards you wagging her tail. She jumps on you and licks your face. “I will take her home now,” you say. That puppy has just been claimed. This is how it is with us at baptism. Jesus says; “You are mine, come with me.”

The question is; “do we respond like the puppy?” Do we run towards our master who has claimed us – the one who feeds us and cares for us? The one who would do anything for us, even sacrificing his own life – the one who will eventually bring us home?

Or, do we run the other way wanting to stay with the other lost and unclaimed dogs and cats? And if we choose to do this, just think of the disappointment of the master when the puppy does not want to be claimed. How would you feel if after searching and searching, you finally find your precious little puppy, and she turns away and wants nothing to do with you?

This is how God feels when we choose to go our own way. And this is certainly an option for us. For God does not force us to love Him. God does not force us into a relationship. God did not make us to be puppets.

God also does not play favorites. God invites everyone to be part of God's Kingdom. Therefore baptism is the great equalizer.

It doesn't matter whether we are a tiny infant or an adult, a CEO or a common laborer, an "A" student or a "D" student, a gifted athlete or a klutz, popular or lonely, educated or uneducated, wealthy or poor, a Democrat or a Republican. God makes no distinctions.

We, however, delight in distinctions. We look for ways to elevate ourselves above others. We worry about our status and our dignity. Yet we are all baptized alike – with the same water, in the same Triune Name of God, into the same death and resurrection of Jesus.

Imagine taking a bath in someone else's bath water. I know that years ago, this was fairly common. But to us moderns, it's a rather disgusting thought, especially when we seem to be so obsessed with the idea of "catching something" from someone else.

But that's what Jesus did. For the water of the Jordan River teemed with sin the day Jesus was baptized. It was and is our sin, the collective sin of the world. It was filled with every imaginable evil: the worst of immorality, drunkenness, deceit, pride, gossip, slander, and greed that our sinful nature can produce.

The Pharisees and religious leaders of the day refused to step into such water. They didn't want to be seen in the same water with sinners. They figured that they had no need for repentance and washing.

But Jesus was not ashamed to step into a sinner's bath water. He stood in the water with the prostitute and the tax collector, with the Gentile and the outcast. He stood shoulder to shoulder in solidarity with sinners. He bathed with us. He became steeped in our sin. He was made sin for us, so that we can be seen as free of sin.

You see, in Jesus' baptism, God showed us that in our baptism, heaven is opened to us. The barrier between us and God is torn down. The door is unlocked. The gate is unbarred.

Therefore now, we have peace with God through Jesus. We have access to God's grace. We may come into God's presence with thanksgiving, and enter His courts with praise. Heaven is opened to us, and God descends to meet us. Where? In the water, of course.

If we only believed this Word connected to Baptism! We would thank God daily for our Baptism, making the sign of the cross morning and evening as the Catechism instructs us. We would know for certain that we have been claimed, and we belong to God.

We would draw upon our Baptism daily. And when our sins oppress us and our conscience weighs us down with guilt, we would say along with Martin Luther: "Nevertheless, I am baptized! And if I am baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body."

We would then urge others to Baptism, with greater zeal and energy than we urge others to see a new movie or go to a good restaurant or vote in a particular way. We would hold Baptism up as one of the greatest gifts and treasures that God has given us.

And so today, as we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, we remember the heavens being torn open; the dove descending; and the voice of the Father.

You see, those things didn't happen for the benefit of Jesus, but rather for the benefit of you and me, that we might delight in our Baptism and give thanks daily for all that God has done.

For again we hear the word of God as spoken through the prophet Isaiah; "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, and you are mine." This is indeed good news. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.
Amen.