

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. We Lutherans usually think of baptism as a special part of the service for infants, often not too long after birth, but Jesus was not an infant when he was baptized, instead he was Jewish and he had been circumcised on the eighth day after his birth as called for in the books of the law. So here he is being baptized.

Now you may or may not know it, but we follow certain procedures in preparing for a baptism. There is conversation with me as pastor, the date is selected, usually on the basis of when sponsors and family can be present.

You can always tell when there is a baptism that is going to happen in a service, we have visitors, nervous parents, curious big brothers and or sisters, old enough to know something is going on but not quite old enough to understand what that something is. Godparents and grandparents, pews normally empty suddenly might have 10 or 15 people sitting in them, baptismal font is in the front of the chancel, the Christ candle is lit, folks are ready to take some pictures. Then of course there is the baby, maybe awake, maybe not, the center of attention and not even knowing it.

Then we get to the service itself, promises to be made, obligations to be kept, responses of "I do," and from the congregation, from you, "we do." The Apostle's Creed is recited by article in response to questions from the pastor. God is thanked because in the beginning the Spirit moved over the waters and by "your Word" the world was created. Then those wonderful words "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." A new child of God is sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever, and we welcome the newly baptized into the body of Christ!

The font has fresh water in it, we make the sign of the cross, the baptismal candle is lit, and each time we see a baptism, it is a special event, a new, wonderful occasion.

No doubt you have noticed that Jesus' baptism is not described this way, you would think that as important as the event was it would have been full of ceremony, but instead our Gospel writer, Mark, gives it only three sentences. No promises, no sign of the cross. The heavens open, only a simple bird, a dove, appears. Oh, then there was a voice: "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased."

John the Baptizer did not have an ELW. Jesus did not have a white robe or a baptismal gown either, especially one that his parents might have worn. But then, the dove and the voice pretty much say it all. Just a dove and a voice. Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens open, the Spirit, descends on him. The only time in the Bible that God's Spirit is identified with a dove, and yet for 2,000 years the dove has been the church's most widely used symbol of God's Holy Spirit. That tells you about the importance of this appearance at Jesus' baptism. Here was a vision of God's own presence, the immediacy of the Spirit, right in the middle of this event.

God's Spirit is present as parents and godparents, sponsors, and child gather around our font. Baptism is not just a ritual for our kids, it is an occasion when God's Spirit is right here among us! Baptism is, as Luther described it, a "visible sign of God's invisible grace and love."

Whether we have a baby or an adult who is being baptized, the living God is in the middle of those gathered here, and I know this because God has promised to be here as God was present at Jesus' baptism.

And we have the voice. It reminds of me of the servant song from Isaiah 42: "I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." Not an easy job, but you know, that is the mission laid upon each one of us. Justice is one of those things that certainly does not happen naturally, justice, suffering are easy to ignore, after all, they are painful reminders of our humanity. But that is where Jesus was sent, that is where you and I are sent, we are sent to bring about justice and peace, to care for others and the world that God made, to proclaim Christ through word and deed, to nurture in faith and prayer, share the holy Scriptures, to live among God's faithful people, bringing others to God's supper and the word of God, teaching the Lord's prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments. We are to care for the homeless, the hungry, to be a difference, to make peace a reality.

We by ourselves cannot do it, but we are not left on our own, because we are given the power of God which comes from the Holy Spirit. We are not good enough, capable enough, we wonder if the mission is beyond us, we hear again that voice: "You are my Son," "You are my daughter."

It is astounding, in our baptisms God accepts us as we are, small, helpless, crying, for many of us when we are so young we cannot say his name much less know what is happening to us, and yet the waters of baptism have been poured over us, and it is for life! No strings attached, we come face-to-face with a love that accepts us: "you are my son, my daughter."

Baptism is not a magic spell, it is not a golden ticket to heaven or a theological insurance policy we take out on infants. It is about life, an entrance into the life of Jesus, the life of his church. We are marked as belonging to God, we baptize because we want the baptized to live in the company of God's people, to grow in faith love and obedience to the will of God.

Remember the vision and the voice because it is the same voice that was present at your baptism. Remember those words, "Pour out your Holy Spirit, the power of your living Word, that those who are washed in the waters of baptism may be given new life." Sustained with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord, joy in God's presence, now and forever. Always remember you are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever! AMEN