

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 8, 2022 (Baptism of Our Lord, Year A)
Matthew 3:13-17
Psalm 29

- 1 Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- 3 The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters.
- 4 The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
- 8 The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness.
- 9 The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"
- 10 The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.

This psalm transports me to the shore of Lake Superior. A gale-force wind blows; waves pound the sand or break on the giant boulders.

Have you seen pictures of the spray from the waves crashing on the cliffs up the North Shore? The explode as high as this building is tall. It's incredible!

In the wild of nature, I hear the "voice of the Lord." The Psalm proclaims God as Creator of the cosmos, able to shake the wilderness and cause the oak trees to whirl.

Each year the appointed readings for the celebration of The Baptism of Our Lord change, but this psalm is ALWAYS the appointed psalm. Why is that, do you think? Maybe because there are OTHER waters over which God speaks, the waters of the font.

Baptismal fonts come in all shapes and sizes, of course, from large tanks used for immersion to a small bowl on a table.

I once served a church that had a TINY bowl, in a very old font. It was so small that I couldn't fit this big hand inside it. I had to use a shell to splash the water. But ALL these fonts hold the SAME waters of baptism, and OVER these waters the voice of the Lord THUNDERS: "You are my beloved child. Clothed in the Christ, you are HELD in my love forever."

Baptism is a POWERFUL force in the life of a Christian. It's something we all share in common. If you meet a Catholic in Ireland, she was baptized. If you meet a Pentecostal in Nigeria, he was baptized. Christians all over the world can say that they were baptized in Christ.

You and I KNOW water. ALL of God's children KNOW water. We share by our faith this common symbol of the power of God over the deep and raging chaos of life. As our flood prayer says, "The floods shall not overwhelm us, the deep shall not swallow us up, for Christ has brought us over to the land of promise." We know water! All over the world, Baptism unites us.

That's because JESUS knows water. It all started that day that Jesus showed up at the Jordan, to be baptized by John. The place was TEAMING with SINNERS – faulty, flawed, guilty, sorry human beings – who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around. If you've ever read the arrest record in the newspaper, then you know the KINDS of things some of them were guilty of – drunk driving, bad checks, petty larceny, assault. Some were NOTORIOUS sinners, and some were there for crimes of the heart, known only to themselves.

And in our imaginations, they were the ONLY ones there. But I suspect MOST of them weren't so different from you and I, with PETTY sins, or simply the sin of PETTINESS.

They were ALL LOOKING for something – some MEANING in their lives, some purpose. They went to find God. They went to be cleaned, to be washed in the water. That's what the word "baptism" means – a bath, to be MADE CLEAN.

Then JESUS showed up and got in LINE with them. And you know, the Christian church has NEVER been COMFORTABLE with that, with the baptism of Jesus. What was he DOING in that crowd of sinners, looking and acting like one of THEM?

That question bothered ME for a long time too. Why DID Jesus get baptized? We all know why WE get baptized—to become children of God, to become part of the church, to have our sins forgiven, to receive the gifts of the Spirit, and so many other reasons—but NONE of those reasons applied to JESUS. John's baptism was for repentance, but Jesus didn't NEED his sins FORGIVEN. He was God in the flesh; he was perfect, he was WITHOUT sin. And as the Son of God, he didn't NEED to be blessed by the Spirit – he already WAS.

And really, GOSSIP being what it is, his participating in a ceremony for sinners would have been DISASTROUS to his reputation. You can almost hear it, “Did you hear about Jesus. He went out and got baptized with all those sinners? What's WRONG with him?”

But that's exactly the point. We spend a lot of time in the church talking about God's love for sinners, but we sure go to a lot of trouble not to be MISTAKEN for ONE of them – guilt by association and all that. But Jesus – our LORD – didn't seem too concerned about that. In him, God's being-WITH-us included God's being in the RIVER with us, in the flesh with us, in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of new life with us.

For Jesus, it wasn't a baptism of repentance for HIS sin; it was a baptism for MY sin, and YOURS, and the sins of the WORLD. He was baptized for you and me, just as, a few years LATER, he died on the cross, not for his OWN sin, but for OURS.

By going to John to be baptized, he joined people who were acknowledging that their lives were totally messed up and empty and uncertain and in need of a fresh start. Jesus publicly demonstrated the MEANING of Emmanuel – God IS with us. God has come to us, IN this world, IN our human condition. God understands! God knows what life and death are really LIKE for us!

But that's not the END of the story. If it were, we'd be MISSING something – something REALLY IMPORTANT. Because there's a whole world of people out there who DON'T know water. They don't HAVE the strength and the community the water GIVES us. And they aren't just THOSE people; they're our friends, our coworkers, our neighbors.

Baptism calls us to follow Jesus' example and JOIN them in their pain. And that begins with getting in the RIVER WITH them, SHARING their sorrow and pain, LISTENING to their story.

If you're wondering what you can SAY, if ANYTHING needs to be said at ALL, just listen to the rest of the story. “Just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove...And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”

When WE were baptized, the Spirit descended on US too. And the words of God that THUNDERED over Jesus, God THUNDERED over each of you, “You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Hear those words again, because you are baptized, and God SHOUTS them to you every day of your lives. God's THUNDERING it right now: “You are my child. I love you. And I'm proud of you.”

The waters of baptism are MIGHTY waters, made POWERFUL by God. In THIS water, God's CLAIM on us is forever, proclaimed with THUNDERING love.

That's what baptism means. It's more than just an event, or even just a sacrament, it's the mission of the church. It's the very purpose for the EXISTENCE of the church. It's the reason we're here. “Go and make disciples, baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Jesus COMMANDED it. He wants the WHOLE WORLD to know water, because EVERY hurting person needs to hear those words from God as DEEPLY as we do, “You are my child. I love you. And I'm proud of you.”

That EVERY person may KNOW that, that EVERY person may KNOW WATER, THAT'S our mission. May it be so. Amen.