

Sermon on Luke 3:15-17,21-22
Sunday, January 10, 2010, Baptism of Our Lord
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Last night I returned from a 26-hour overnight retreat with 25 - 7th and 8th grade confirmation students. It wasn't the ordeal it might have been, as we had planned a weekend at Bay Lake Bible Camp on an island in northern Minnesota. But with 30 below windchills in the forecast, we wisely switched locations to First Lutheran Church on Dayton's Bluff in St. Paul. No frozen walks across the ice at night, but I'm not disappointed. Instead we slept on the fireside room floor and in the chapel of the church, but at least we stayed warm! We explored faith and trust in God and each other, which is one of the purposes of confirmation, a time for young people to learn what it means to be a child of God and affirm their baptism.

Which is what we are doing today in worship, as we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, and affirm our own baptisms. For the 12-day season of Christmas is over; the decorations have been taken down and packed away. It's time to change focus in the church, as our scripture lessons do, from the celebration of Jesus' birth and honoring the Christ child in Bethlehem, to the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry in Galilee and our calling to "follow him". We are reminded today that from the beginning, and for the first 300 hundred years of Christianity Christmas wasn't celebrated, but Jesus' baptism was, because it was considered much more important. For when Jesus came to the Jordan river to be baptized by John the Baptist, he was revealed to the world as God's beloved Son, as the voice from heaven proclaimed: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

On that day John immersed Jesus in the waters of the Jordan River, and all the sins of the world were washed away – all forgiven when Jesus died on that cross three years later on Calvary. These days we baptized one another in baptismal fonts in churches, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as our sins are washed away with the water (and the blood of the cross) and God's Word of promise. What is that promise? It is the declaration of God that you and I (and all the baptized) are God's daughters and sons, adopted by God's grace, and made part of God's family, Christ's Body, the Church. So when you and I are baptized, it is like God saying to us, "You are my beloved sons, my beloved daughters, with you also I am well pleased, because of Jesus Christ."

Who doesn't want to hear such words from a loving parent? These days many people, young and old, struggle with self-esteem. Some of this struggle may come from the difficulty of feeling loved. Perhaps some haven't heard clearly the words "I love you" from a loving parent or spouse. Either a parent hasn't said them, or their children haven't heard them, for whatever reason. So as children

grow into adolescence, and young people into adulthood, the lack of self-esteem or feeling part of a loving family or community can result in alienation, or separation from family, church or community. It's far too common, which is why it is so important for us to hear these words and remember our baptism – when you and I first hear the words “I love you” from God, and became a child of God. We know this because this is what Jesus has taught us both with his words and with his life, that God is like a loving Father who reaches out to each of us with love and mercy.

Some of you have lived all your lives knowing you are part of a loving family. But some of you, and so many others, may not have had such an experience, and may still be searching for such love and acceptance. For the most important word that you and I can hear from the Church is the declaration of God that you and I (or any human being) is a child of God. So here it is: “you are a child of God, and you have been marked with this love in baptism, when you were washed clean with water and God's Word of grace, and you were marked with the cross of Christ forever with oil on your forehead. You have become part of God's family, your sins have been forgiven, and you have received new life forever because of this great gift of God's love in Jesus Christ, which you and I and so many have been given in baptism. Of course, we were already loved by God, as all God's children throughout the world are loved forever, and without condition, by our Creator. But in baptism you and I have received the sign, with water and God's word, and we are continually reminded of our acceptance into God's family whenever we witness the baptism of another human being, or hear the story of Jesus' baptism by John. So if you hear nothing else today, hear this clearly: you are loved, you are a child of God. No matter who you are, what you look like, who your parents are, where you live, where you have come from, or what you have done! God loves you, and you are God's beloved daughters and sons. So please repeat after me: **I am a child of God. Jesus loves me. This I know.**

But there's more! This promise is not just a one-time thing. It continues, it is repeated, forever. For God is with us throughout our lives. God promises to walk with us wherever we go. In fact, God goes ahead of us, to prepare our way. In our first lesson, God gave this promise to the Israelites, even as they were lost in exile. They had been defeated in battle, and carried off into exile in a foreign land. But God had not forgotten them. Through Isaiah the prophet, God's promise reassured the people that they were still loved by God. These words of promise have been passed on to us, through our baptism into Christ, as we, too, have become part of God's family. Throughout the trials and challenges of our lives, God will also walk with us, no matter where we go, what we do, whatever successes or failures you and I experience in this life. God is with us always. So hear the words of God's promise from Isaiah to you:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When 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, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God...Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you...Do not fear, for I am with you.”

I don't know how many times I have read these words of promise to those who are suffering, who are hospitalized or awaiting surgery, who are living with cancer or receiving hospice care. I want you to know how much hope and comfort people of faith receive from these reassuring words from God. They know that they will suffer. Some of them know that they will die. But hearing such words, and with faith, they are not afraid - because God is with them. The Lord, their shepherd Jesus is walking with them, through the fire, through whatever trial or temptation lies ahead. And that is all that they need. That is also all that WE need, when we believe. Because it is by faith that you and I can withstand all kinds of adversity and testing, and it is with faith that we can even face our own death – or that of our loved ones – with peace and grace, when we know that God is with us to the end. So this promise of scripture is also for you and me.

Now, I don't know what all you are facing in your life right now, or what you are feeling at the present moment. Things may be going well for you, and you may not even be feeling the need for the assurance and comfort of faith. But one day we all will need that reassurance and comfort. So every Sunday when we worship, every day as we pray to God and hear God's word in scripture, we are preparing and strengthening ourselves for those days when we do need assurance of God's presence and the comfort of God's love. When you and I need to hear the words “Jesus loves me...I am a child of God.” For such days come to each of us.

So whether you are a child, a confirmation student or an adult; feeling fortunate that a loving family surrounds you or going through times of conflict or hardship in your life, or grieving the loss of a loved one, God's promise is the same. God loves you. God has created you. God has chosen you to be a beloved child in God's own family, and God will love you and be with you forever. Through the waters, through the fires, through whatever comes in this life. This is why you and I come together each Sunday, to hear this promise from God once more, and to hear it together with the rest of our beloved family of God, the Church. There is nowhere else that you will hear this promise: not at school, not at work, nowhere in the world except here, in God's community of faith. So thanks be to God that we have this family, that you and I are part of it, and we can share this word of love with one another and with our children. Now our calling is to reach out with this love to others, and speak of it outside these doors, so that the whole world will hear this promise from God as well. Thanks be to God. Amen.