

Sermon on Matthew 3:13-17
Baptism of Our Lord, January 8, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today, I have good news for you! God has sent his very own Son, Jesus, into this world to “fulfill all righteousness, to set you free from sin, and give you the promise of life forever in him.” After a month of Sundays preparing for his coming during the season of Advent, and after two Sundays celebrating his birth on Christmas, we have gathered today to see Jesus all grown up, stepping into the Jordan River to be baptized, as God’s own beloved Son. As I am ordained by the church as a pastor to preach the gospel, which literally means “good news”, I thought I would begin this sermon with the good news of Jesus’ baptism by John. For this was a sign of Jesus’ identity as God’s beloved Son in each of the gospels, which was followed by many other signs to show that Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed one of God, long expected by the faithful, the one for whom we have all waited. This is indeed “good news”, in times when most of what we hear is bad.

“Good” news means that this is news “with a point of view”. It’s not merely a reported “fact” or bit of information publicized by the press. We get all kinds of news today, in the media: we get good news, bad news, salacious news, gossip, and “fake” news. We heard a lot of “fake news” in 2016, particularly during the national election campaign – which is news that is not true, just a “made up story” that is publicized on the media (in print, social media, or on television) as if it were “the news” – and mistaken for the news that is fact checked by journalists and watchdogs. Actually, all “news” has a point of view – all is written from a bias or perspective of a reporter or journalist – but some news that is obviously fake, an erroneous lie that is put out there disguised as “fact”, is known as “fake news”. Have any of you read anything this past year that you would call “fake news”?

It’s not a new invention. Fake news has been around for a long time. From the early years of colonies, and the founding of the United States as a republic, we have had “fake” news. It was just political opinion printed in newspapers, like today’s editorials or political cartoons, distributed by the writers and owners of newspapers to spread their message. Martin Luther did the same thing with the Small Catechism and his diatribes against the Pope, printed on paper with the invention of moveable type and Gutenberg’s printing press, which spread like videos gone viral on social media. It has always been difficult to separate fact from fiction, and the truth from the lies in printed word. Schools of journalism and historical study took on “fact checking” as one of their main tasks, but the truth has always been elusive. Because truth is always a matter of perspective – right? There are very few “facts” that stand for themselves. Most things we don’t believe

we consider “lies”, and the things we do believe we consider “truth”. It was a matter of fact in last year’s election campaigns that things people didn’t want to hear were considered lies, and those things people wanted to hear were considered truth. So it all depended on what you wanted to believe, or not.

So we can establish that all “news” is told with a point of view, or bias. History is usually written by the victors, or by the last ones standing after a war or conflict. Newspaper stories are written according to the point of view, or rules, of their editors or editorial boards. Fox News, MSNBC, cable news and public television news are often told from opposite points of view, with very different – even conflicting – versions of the truth. I hope I am not shocking anyone.

So in the Bible, we hear “the good news” told from the particular point of view of faith. All the biblical books in the Bible were written by human authors, inspired by their faith in God, to tell something that happened – actions by people of faith or the very acts of God in history. By whose authority? Usually the authority claimed by biblical authors is that of God, who told them in a vision or a dream, or that they are eyewitness accounts of the stories of faith. The “proof” would come in the eyewitness accounts of miracles of healing or faith, or signs and wonders that could only happen if they came from God.

So we only recently heard about the birth of God’s Son Jesus on Christmas, the biblical account of angel messengers appearing in the sky to shepherds on Christmas night. The angel said, *“To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And THIS WILL BE A SIGN UNTO You: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.”* Not scientific proof of an empirical fact, mind you, but a “sign from God” – that God had chosen to become present with us human beings. The sign was in the all-too-common fact of a child being born to a mother in Bethlehem, lying in a manger, because there was no room in the inn. Generations of Christians, and you and I today, have heard, memorized, and shared this story in our songs and our creeds, accepting this sign from God “on faith” that this child, Jesus, is our savior, and the savior of the whole world! Amazing, isn’t it? Some people don’t accept such signs as proof of Jesus’ identity, but we receive them as part of a whole, larger package that we profess from our point of view of faith. It’s not because of the “signs” that we believe, but the “signs” point us to that God of grace and compassion who sends his own Son out of love, to live among us, and give us hope and new life! Hope in Jesus is what we believe in.

So today we have heard a story from Matthew’s gospel about Jesus, now a grown up adult, being baptized by John the Baptist. It’s a very short story, only four verses, important enough to be included in each of the gospels, so it must be important! The point of the story is to show Jesus’ identity as the Beloved Son of God, his anointing in baptism, as an example for us all. In contrast to all the “false

prophets” and “fake rabbis” that came around preaching and teaching, Jesus was the “real deal” – shown by his new teachings (that we will hear about in the coming weeks), and shown by the following signs:

Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, whom some thought was the prophet Elijah re-appearing, and the gospel writers taught was the one who would prepare the way of the Lord, as Isaiah foretold. All the people considered John a prophet, and came to him to be baptized for repentance and the forgiveness of sin. So it was important for Jesus to come to John the Baptist for baptism.

Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, an important river in Israel’s history, where the Israelites crossed over into the Promised Land, where Namaan the Syrian was cleansed of leprosy by Elijah. The Jordan ran from the north, from Galilee, the land of the Gentiles, south to the Dead Sea, east of Jerusalem. This is where John the Baptist laid hands on Jesus, in a sense anointing Jesus for ministry, while at the same time saying “he wasn’t worthy to carry Jesus’ sandals”.

So there was water from the Jordan River, hands of the Baptist to anoint Jesus for ministry, and then another sign: “*Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.*” In scripture, doves were often a sign of the spirit of God, appearing to human beings. The Spirit, or *ruach* of God swept like the wind, or hovered over the waters of creation like a dove, in Genesis. In the story of the great flood, Noah sent out a dove from the ark over the waters, which returned with an olive branch in its beak, a symbol of peace. So Noah knew it was safe to land and for life to begin again, and the dove has been seen ever since as a sign from God. Later in Leviticus, doves became a symbol of atonement, and would be sacrificed at the birth of a child – so two turtledoves were sacrificed when Jesus was presented by his parents in the Temple of Jerusalem. But the most enduring symbol of the dove was seen in the baptism of Jesus, and so Christian art over the centuries has depicted the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, including symbols for the Trinity. So you see on the cover of our service sheet today, showing a dove hovering above Jesus’ head when he was baptized, one of our stained glass windows at Redeemer.

And then the final sign: Jesus heard a powerful voice from heaven say “*This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.*” So there we have it: the good news of Jesus – being baptized by John, attested to by the sign of a dove – the presence of God’s Spirit, and authorized as God’s Son by the very voice of God.

And how about you? What is the good news about you? You were baptized, and made a child of God – baptized by a pastor – maybe even me – who was not worthy to tie the sandals on Jesus’ feet, but that doesn’t matter, because God did the baptizing, by water and the word! In baptism God made YOU a beloved child of God – a sign of what you have been from the beginning, as are all children of this world, regardless of their ethnicity or belief. The sign is the water

and the Word of God which has been said over you, and the authorization of your identity as God's child is *in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!*

So it's not so important that you are a Lutheran, or a Roman Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist or Episcopal, or any other Christian denomination. It is not so important that you are American, or British, or Mexican, or Native American, or African American, or European American, or any other ethnicity or tribe, citizen, immigrant, documented or undocumented. It doesn't matter what language you speak, your gender identity, whether you are male or female, gay or straight. Whether you are Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jew, atheist or agnostic, black, white, yellow or red, young or old, rich or poor, liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, whether you voted for Hillary or voted for Trump, couldn't vote or didn't vote at all. The most important thing to know is that *you are a beloved child of God, that every human being and every living creature is beloved, and that God is present with us in the world, to give life, forgiveness, hope and love to all who exist.* This truth, this good news: that we are all beloved of God, supercedes all the divisions, every name and description by which we wish to be known, and *beloved* is the most important name you have been given by God. If you and I could call one another, all children, and all human beings by this name, *beloved*, just imagine how our divisions, jealousies and hatreds would disappear! That's where it all starts, with love for one another, and naming one another "beloved", as God has named us. And *this* is the message the Church must preach today, when there is so much hate spoken and preached in this world.

So brothers and sisters in Christ, this is good news, not "fake" news, for you – it's real! *God, who is rich in mercy and love, gives [you and me] a new birth into a living hope through the sacrament of baptism. By water and the Word God delivers [you and me] from sin and death and raises us to new life in Jesus Christ. We are united with all the baptized in the one body of Christ, anointed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and joined in God's mission for the life of the world.*

Baptism by water and the Word are the signs of God's love for you and me who follow Christ Jesus. Compassion and acts of love for our neighbor are the signs of our love for the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.