

Sermon on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Isaiah 43:1-7  
The Baptism of Our Lord, Sunday, January 10, 2016  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

If you have been following my musings about the variety of days and ways in which Christians in the Western Church and in the Eastern Orthodox Church have celebrated Christmas and the Epiphany of our Lord, you will remember that today, the Baptism of Our Lord is a central focus of the Eastern Orthodox celebration of Christmas and Epiphany, which happened this past week, on January 7<sup>th</sup>. Epiphany is not just about the visit of the Wise Men – it is also celebrated as Christmas, and the Baptism of our Lord, when Jesus was revealed to the rest of the world as our Savior. It also includes the first miracle of Jesus – changing water into wine at a wedding in Cana. (We'll read that story NEXT week!)

Some of you Facebook followers may have noticed the pictures I posted of how Orthodox Christians celebrate Epiphany and Christmas in Bulgaria and Turkey. I shared pictures of how a crowd of faithful Christian men dressed in speedos dove into a frozen lake in Sofia, Bulgaria, to compete for a wooden cross thrown in by the clergy. (I hope it floated!) In another Bulgarian city, men dressed in their holiday finest danced in the frigid river, while two of them jostled for a floating wooden crucifix, and the honor of carrying the cross out of the water to present it to the priest. I also posted pictures of the Patriarch of Constantinople splashing worshipers with baptismal water in Istanbul, Turkey, at the Epiphany Day service – after which he tossed a wooden cross into the waters of the Bosphorus River for men to dive in and retrieve it. The Patriarch blessed the man who was successful in retrieving the cross. It reminds us Minnesotans of those who jump into the frigid waters of White Bear Lake on New Year's Day every year – just to say they did it - without a connection to baptism, or any wooden cross to retrieve. Similar action, but without religious significance in Minnesota! Frankly, on a day like today – with a below zero windchill, I can't imagine it! Even watching football – the Minnesota Viking religion – will happen indoors for most sane Minnesotans! Only the truly faithful will don their winter gear and take a seat at TCF Bank Stadium today – perhaps they seek the sacred holy grail of the Vince Lombardi trophy or a Super Bowl victory: a false god if I ever saw one!

Now, if we were Eastern Orthodox Christians from Bulgaria, we might be trekking down to the shores of the Mississippi today to celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord. You men would be putting on your speedos and preparing to jump into the frigid waters – at 10 below zero! You women would be wearing white robes and singing praise to God (that you have more sense). I would wind up and throw my wooden cross as far into the river as I possibly could, and then the fun would

begin. But - we are Lutherans, from the far north, and we don't do such things in Minnesota. Fortunately for us all, because it is FAR TOO COLD out there!

Instead, today we opened worship with our Thanksgiving for Baptism – inviting you to feel and touch the water of baptism from Redeemer's font in the comfort of a heated sanctuary. I hope you felt the splash of the holy waters on your face, to remind you that baptism is not just a warm washing of your forehead, as it may have been when you were baptized in some Lutheran church somewhere in this United States. For some, baptism has been an immersion into the cold waters of a lake, a river, or a baptistery – not just a symbolic sprinkling. In the early church, some converts were baptized in the catacombs beneath Rome, immersed naked in the water, then raised up out of the water and covered with a clean, white robe to symbolize the new life in Christ begun. Were any of you immersed in the waters of a lake, river, or baptistery for baptism? My wife tells me how she was baptized as a teenager in a water tank, in a refugee camp on the border of Thailand and Cambodia. I was sprinkled as an infant with a few drops of water from a pastor's hand at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in St. Anthony Park about 25 years before that. Different waters from across the world, but the same effect; we were both baptized, by water and the Word of God's grace.

So there are two main themes for worship today. The first is to celebrate the Baptism of our Lord Jesus, and proclaim his identity as the Beloved Son of God. For when John the Baptist was out there in the wilderness of the Jordan, preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins and baptizing the crowds who came to him, some wondered if HE were the Messiah. John said no – there was someone coming who was greater than him. It was Jesus – and when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the gospel says that *“the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”* God broke through the barrier of the heavens, broke open the clouds, to shine down on humankind, focusing on the One whom God sent to save us all from sin and death. So if there was any doubt, on this day Jesus is revealed to the nations of this world as the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior who brings us life!

The second theme for this day is to connect our baptism to his. For we, too, have been baptized, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and thus you and I receive our identity as “beloved children of God”. Now, this theme is not expressly said in the gospel lesson – but it becomes clear as you and I read through the gospels, and hear Jesus' promises to us. Throughout the scriptures we hear of God's love for all the creatures God has made, and the compassion God has for all who call upon the Lord. Jesus makes good on this promise by giving his life so that you and I and the whole world will have life.

This is abundantly clear in the first lesson from the prophet Isaiah. The words are directed to people of Israel who had been living in exile in Babylon, whom God has promised to bring home. Isaiah says that they no longer have to live in fear, because the one who made them, who created and formed them, is bringing them home – redeeming them from their enemies. This was something surprising to declare to people who had no standing in the world, who were slaves in Babylon for generations – for all the evidence served to show that they were nothing at all!

Isaiah relayed this promise from God to these lowly exiles in a foreign land: *“Thus says the Lord... ‘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... Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you...’”*

In baptism, this is the promise you and I also receive, out of love, directly from our Creator. Children of God: God’s love is so great for you that God has not withheld God’s only Son in order to give you the promise of life. It’s a love so deep and wide that it includes you, me, and all the people of this world – but it certainly does include you (first person singular, direct address!). It’s God’s promise to always be faithful, to always be with you, no matter what happens, no matter what you do or do not do, even if you and I abandon God, our Lord will never abandon us! This is the gospel truth – it is the good news of God!

Today we repeat these words as we celebrate the Epiphany of the Baptism of Our Lord, and remember our own baptisms – a short time, or a long time ago. It comes with an image of the heavens opening up, and the spirit of God shining through upon Jesus – and on us. God breaks through whatever barriers exist to place God’s loving eyes upon us, and bless us with the promise of God’s love. It breaks through all those human barriers of sin and death, prejudice, race or class, gender or age, poverty or wealth. It comes in a promise first made to slaves and exiles in Babylon, and now it comes to you and me: a promise to bring us all home.

The most moving times that I have ever read these verses from Isaiah are the times when a faithful child of God is dying. This passage from Isaiah is one of those chosen for ministry at the time of death, when life-sustaining care is removed and a family is gathered. It is read so that the faithful will hear once again the promise of the Creator, to always be there – through the waters, and through the fire – to hear the words: *“I have called you by name, you are mine... I love you,”* from the very mouth of the Lord. May you and I always keep these words in our hearts, that they will sustain us in faith from birth to death, from the day we are baptized to the moment we take our last breath.

And may the Lord keep all who are born of water and the Spirit faithful in God's service; that we may all rejoice to be called children of God, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.