

Sermon on Mark 1:4-11  
The Baptism of Our Lord, Sunday, January 7, 2018  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ...

This time of year, early January in Minnesota, I am always fascinated by the fixation on “water” that Minnesotans have, especially the cold and frozen variety! On New Year’s Day we observed many taking the “Polar Plunge” into freezing waters, like White Bear Lake, leaping through the frigid, below zero air into frozen waters below, to raise money for charity and prove their reckless, fearless attitude toward winter. Most of us view such antics from afar, in the warmth and safety of our homes, on the television news. Just the thought of grown men in speedos leaping into Minnesota’s frozen waters makes me shiver. I think they are nuts, but they “took the plunge”!

Then, on Friday afternoon, January 5<sup>th</sup>, the Minnesota Eastern Orthodox Christian Clergy Association held their second annual Blessing of the Waters for Theophany service ON the Mississippi River at Hidden Falls Park – which was for us westerners the Twelfth Day of Christmas and the Eve of the Epiphany of our Lord, and for Orthodox Christians, Christmas Eve – I believe. I hope that no one actually “took the plunge” at Hidden Falls, and the priests limited their celebration to blessing the waters with frankincense. I hear that the ice was free on the river.

Today we are gathered in the warmth of God’s house to celebrate another sort of plunge – the one that Jesus took in the Jordan River on the Baptism of Our Lord. We heard again about John the Baptizer, who appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And of all the people from Jerusalem and the Judean countryside who came to hear him, and were baptized there, who took the plunge in the Jordan River. Something was going on. People weren’t happy with Herod, their puppet king, or of being occupied by the hated Romans. But John the Baptizer told them of one who was coming, who was greater than them, who would baptize them not with water, but with the Holy Spirit. He gave them hope as they looked to the future.

Then Jesus showed up. Last Sunday we read about him as a tiny baby, being presented in the Temple of Jerusalem. Now he was all grown up, ready for his mission from God, so he came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Why would Jesus be baptized, you may ask? Not for the forgiveness of sins. But to be named by God as “my beloved Son”, commissioned for his mission in the world. So Jesus took the plunge, and as he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. He heard a voice from heaven say, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

This was an “epiphany” of God, revealing God’s divine presence in the world first in the birth of Jesus, now in Jesus’ baptism by John. No one had witnessed anything like this before, God “ripping apart” the heavens to take away the cloud that separates us from God. Now God shows in Jesus God’s presence with us – in the birth of a child, in the tearing apart of the heavens, later on in the Transfiguration of Jesus’ appearance on a mountain, and finally, in the bursting of Jesus out from the grave that once had buried him, as he rose from the grave. So the most important message of Jesus’ baptism is his “epiphany”, a fancy “church” word that means how God was revealed to us in Jesus as the Son of God. But that was then; and this is now!

So how is today’s feast of the Baptism of our Lord Jesus an epiphany for us today? Could it be that God’s continued presence is revealed to us today in this celebration of Jesus’ baptism, and in our remembering – and affirming – our own baptisms today? I say, yes. Think about it. Not only was Jesus revealed as God’s beloved Son in his baptism, but Christ Jesus is revealed once again as you and I are baptized in his name, according to his command. When you and I were baptized, you were revealed as God’s beloved child, and given the promise of eternal life.

Today you and I and the whole world are in need of assurance that God is indeed present with us in our world. Sometimes it’s hard to tell, especially if we aren’t already looking for God’s presence. Perhaps we need more “epiphanies” in the world. It’s another way of saying, people need to see more evidence of God’s presence, and many don’t know what to look for. If they didn’t grow up in the church, or didn’t hear the stories of God’s presence in people of faith in scripture, or the stories of Jesus, the apostles and the saints, it can be hard to recognize God’s presence these days. It may be hidden in everything else that is said or done in this world, even those things said or done in Jesus’ name. People get mixed messages.

Perhaps when you and I live out our baptism in words and deeds of witness to God’s love in Christ Jesus – on behalf of those who are suffering or in need of compassion and mercy – these are “epiphanies” of God’s presence in the world. What if you and I were to “take the plunge” – not into frigid waters of northern Minnesota to prove our winter hardiness, but into the world as witnesses of God’s love and mercy? What if you and I “took the plunge” to tear open the fog that hides the presence of God in this world, or keeps God hidden from those who really need to hear and feel God’s love for them?

That’s why I like the image of “taking the plunge” as an image for baptism. Sprinkling is just too tame, too mild, too “Minnesota Lutheran”! I prefer that old Baptist “plunge” into the waters of baptism, the immersion of our whole self into the waters of forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation! We can’t be just “sprinkled” with God’s love, we need to have God’s love poured over us, to be dunked - immersed in it, so that our whole bodies and lives are washed and transformed!

So I invite you to “take the plunge”! Be a witness for Jesus, live your baptism, speak up for God’s justice in this world, where few know what this looks like – because so few dare to speak of it! You and I take the plunge when we declare sanctuary in our church, and make God’s house a place of safety for those living in fear, who have no place to sleep, or fear arrest and deportation – like we did for Michael. We take the plunge when we declare sanctuary for those living with chemical dependency, for families who are without housing on cold winter nights in Minnesota, for women and children living in fear of violence in their own home, who live in fear of violence on the street or by the police, who live in fear of sexual harassment or sexual assault. We take the plunge when we declare sanctuary by speaking out like prophets against those making threats, calling out bullying by our political leaders. Today you and I can take the plunge by being witnesses at the Basilica of St. Mary, to declare that all people are God’s children, as we stand with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers and welcome immigrants and refugees with sanctuary and legal protection. It is the Christian way.

In Minnesota, we are often shy about taking the plunge, so we “toe test” the water in Minnesota lakes, even in summer, lest it be too cold or uncomfortable. Sometimes that just shows good sense. But too often we approach life gingerly, and are too afraid to jump in the water. We sit on the shore and watch others swim! But Jesus calls us to follow him into the water, to immerse ourselves in the life that changes everything! Like the theme for this summer’s ELCA Youth Gathering in Houston: *This Changes Everything!* Though Hurricane Harvey caused billions of dollars in damages and changed many peoples’ lives in Houston last summer, faith in Jesus makes changes that last a lifetime for our youth! I’m talking about God’s power, and following Jesus: faith changes everything, if we only take the plunge into the waters of life!

That’s the invitation, for each of us on this, Jesus’ baptism day. But we also have a word of comfort and assurance. When you and I are baptized, God names you and me as God’s beloved child. That’s the promise we have forever. It’s not about whether you and I “take that plunge” – for we are already wet! It’s an invitation to a deeper life of faith, not a requirement for salvation! Whether you and I are sprinkled with water, have water poured over us, or are immersed in it – *it’s God who has already taken the plunge for us!* God does the baptizing, God has created us, and God has made you and me God’s own beloved children. Nothing can change that, and now no barrier, no wall, no piece of paper, no law or ordinance made by human beings, no hateful words of exclusion, can EVER separate us – or any child of God – from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So come to the waters! The water’s fine! And the people said: AMEN!