



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Baptism of Our Lord

January 10, 2016

“Remembering Our Baptism”

(Luke 3:21-22)

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“Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’” (Luke 3:21-22).

COLLECT: Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

It was quite a crowd gathered there at the river's edge. Matthew says they came from Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside. They made their way out into the wilderness to hear John preach and to be baptized. I wonder what they thought when they saw Jesus lining up for baptism. To most of them, Jesus looked just like anyone else waiting there. He was dirty and dusty and sweaty from the hike, just like the rest of them. If you didn't know any better, you wouldn't have paid any attention to him at all. John had just told them that the One for whom he was preparing the way was so powerful, so holy, so good, that he, John, was not even worthy to stoop down and touch the straps of his sandals. Yet Jesus just simply shows up, without any fuss or fanfare. He comes and stands by the river and waits his turn to be baptized by John . . . just like everybody else.

It was a hot and humid Sunday morning some seventeen years ago in St. Louis. A neighbor by the name of Jerry was standing next to me by the baptismal font, his wife Sue, next to him for support. They lived two doors down. Once again the church's brand new air conditioning system had failed. The ushers opened up the little windows in the stained glass walls, and turned on the fans, but they were all bark and no bite. I hadn't even touched the water yet, but looked like I was the one just baptized. "Jerry, do you renounce the devil?" "Yes, I renounce him." "Do you renounce all his works?" "Yes, I renounce them." "Do you renounce all his ways?" "Yes, I renounce them." He spoke the words softly. They were almost lost in the noise of the fans. I think he was very aware of all those people looking

at him, his family too. None of his family was very “churchy”. Church was not their thing. They knew Jerry as a plumber who liked to fish. In fact he taught fly fishing at the local community college. I would see him practicing different kinds of casts, it was part art, part dance and part athleticism and beautiful to watch. That’s how his family knew Jerry, also as the one who liked to party in his younger days. He was a bit of a daredevil too. He once showed me a picture of himself standing on highest truss of the Chain of Rocks Bridge. He wasn’t supposed to be there and was promptly cuffed when he got back down. That’s how his family knew him, but this day Jerry was standing solemnly next to the baptismal font and that’s not how his family knew him.

But Jerry had changed in many ways. The changes began with a diagnosis: ALS – Lou Gehrig’s disease. He could still stand upright and walk with the help of a cane. Often we saw him walking around our block, lap after lap, trying to ward off the relentless progression of ALS.

On one particularly hot, muggy night, Gail and I were out for a walk and Jerry and Sue were on their front porch drinking their specialty: bourbon slushies. They invited us to join them for one. That’s when he learned I was a pastor. I love that moment, when people think back and wonder what they might have said to me before they knew I was a pastor. Sure enough Jerry apologized for all the foul language he had used. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he demanded. “Because it’s not me that you need to worry about” I said. Eventually he relaxed around me, and things returned to normal in the neighborhood.

Actually things shifted into a new normal. As I mentioned before, neither one of them were church-going people. Church made them nervous. They didn’t know the rituals and would have struggled to navigate the liturgy. They weren’t married, but were living together. Having a progressive, incurable disease however, makes a person more introspective, and Jerry started asking me some questions, theological questions. He wondered a lot about

sin and forgiveness. He spent some time with me in informal confession, telling me about his past. I tried my best to help him get reacquainted with God. Actually, I tried to help him get past the God of his childhood, the one who smote you, who frowned at your every move, the fussy historian who kept detailed records of your misbehaviour. I tried to help them get to know Christ Jesus – the God who knew them the best and yet loved them most. The One who when we confess and repent, forgives us and sets us free, even though we may not feel it. He’s the One who remembers our sin no more, who intentionally forgets the record. He’s the One who was 100 percent committed to being their God, even though they, like us, would never be 100-percent committed to being his disciples. After many conversations and questions, they decided they wanted to join the church. First, we had to get them married, which we did in a small, private ceremony, and then we needed to get Jerry baptized.

Jerry’s childhood church had taught him baptism was something you did, a promise you made, and only a believer’s baptism counted and infant baptism wasn’t worth the water. I told him baptism is first and foremost about God choosing us in Jesus Christ, not about our choosing God. Now that doesn’t mean our response to baptism is unimportant. In fact, our response to baptism is very important because when we are living in our baptism, it changes everything about how we live our lives. Our baptism affects the way we spend our time, what we do with our money, how we raise our kids, how we interact with strangers, and how we apologize to our spouses, how we forgive them too. Our response to baptism is crucial, because being baptized we now carry the Lord’s name, we openly and outwardly belong to him, and we don’t want to grieve the Lord nor cause offense to others with our words or actions. In our Epistle lesson, Paul asks if we can deliberately sin, knowing that God will forgive. The translation says, “By no means!” but the Greek is so much stronger. “Heck no!” would still be a sanitized translation.

So in Baptism, we throw off the old man and put on the new. But again, Holy Baptism is first and foremost about God's decision to claim us as his own through Jesus. It's less about our sin and more about God's unmerited goodness and grace.

I might have used this Gospel lesson to aid in those conversations. John had been preaching baptism as an act of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He was very passionately emphasizing the truth that our baptism signals a turning from sin and a turning to God. Later in today's service, we will all have a chance to acknowledge that turning as we affirm our baptism. And we do that because John was spot on. Baptism is an act of new birth, new creation, a new man or woman in Christ.

But then again, here comes Jesus to the Jordan. Jesus the Son of God, the Messiah, the one whose way John was preparing, the one who was so much more powerful and good. Here comes Jesus who had no need to repent or turn or begin again. Why was he standing in line with all the others? Luke indicates Jesus didn't make a big deal of it. Jesus did not preach as he waited. He did not call any attention to himself. Jesus just stood there, waiting. He had no need of repentance. Why is he there? When John sees Jesus, he wants nothing to do with it. "I need to be baptized by you" he says. But Jesus answers him, "Do it now, for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3). He's there to fulfill righteousness.

Frankly, this is what incarnation is all about: God in Jesus taking on our flesh, becoming one of us in every way, not content to be distant and separate from us, but desiring to join us, to be one with us in all that we are. Jesus himself stood in line, shoulder to shoulder with sinners like you and me. Jesus was numbered among the transgressors, not just on the cross between two thieves, but also near the murky waters of the Jordan. Jesus didn't need to be baptized because he had no sin, but he was affirming his identity with sinners in order to trade places with us and provide us his perfect righteousness. He became like we are so that we might become like he is: innocent and blameless.

His baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry. Your baptism, whether you were baptized as an infant or as an adult, marks the beginning of the journey, never the end. Every time you give your young child a bath, you can remind him of his baptism. Every time you take a shower, it can remind you of the same. Every time your daughter looks in the mirror and doesn't like what she sees, you can remind her she is first and foremost a child of God, dearly loved. Every time you feel most like a lost and condemned creature, remember: You are baptized. The baptismal water on your head evaporated within minutes, but the gifts that baptism leaves behind endure forever. You've been washed and claimed by the holy, precious blood of Christ, claimed and sealed forever. When you bring an infant to be baptized, you are deciding there is never a time in our lives when we don't need Jesus, even as newborns, and that you want your infant nurtured in the faith from the very beginning, a nurturing and learning that will continue as long as he lives. And you will have a whole lot of people called Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and School who will walk with you and help you nurture that child in the faith. This church makes promises at every baptism too. And this school, for 15 years now, has been doing the same: nurturing children in the faith. Equipping them to lead but also to serve, equipping them to live and thrive as God's children in the world.

In any event, Jerry decided he wanted to be baptized. And so there he was one hot, muggy Sunday morning, one hand leaning on a cane, the other on the font, trusting that baptism was really more about God's decision for us rather than our puny decisions for God.

The water of baptism was still dripping off of Jerry's head when we heard the congregation say in unison, "Amen. We welcome you in the name of the Lord!" His wife started crying, my wife too, but I have it on good authority the one most pleased was the Lord.

But again, baptism is never the end. It's the beginning. Jerry knew his faith needed ongoing nurture and

instruction, and so he and Sue started showing up with much more regularity for worship and Bible study and Jerry managed to clean up his language some too, even when he wasn't around me. The community of faith there at Grace Lutheran would come to know and love them both and surround them with their care. It was wonderful to see Jerry and Sue mixed into the Body of Christ, especially as they came up to receive the body and blood of the Lord. Often it doesn't all work out so well, but once in a while it does, and when it does, you can see God's hand in the whole thing, his doing, his leading, nudging, providing opportunities, giving and forgiving and keeping.

The disease progressed, first taking the strength out of Jerry's legs. (We would still see him going around the block but it was in a wheelchair to get some fresh air.) And then the disease sapped the strength from Jerry's arms (and we didn't see him practicing his beautiful casting anymore.) Eventually, the disease took aim at his heart and lungs and we lost Jerry shortly before moving to Watertown. He was not lost to the Lord, however, because in Holy Baptism he was made God's own child.

Jerry's story is really your story and mine. It's a story that's much more about God's goodness and grace, than anything we've done to earn that goodness and grace. And for him, as for us, baptism is always the beginning, the beginning of new life in Christ.

Remember your baptism, and give thanks. Amen.

