

Baptism of Our Lord Sunday

January 10, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Gospel: Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

What does baptism mean to you? There are many interpretations when it comes to baptism. Some see baptism as an initiation rite into the Christian community, that you cannot be a Christian unless you are baptized. Then there are those who understand baptism to be "fire insurance." In other words, baptism protects people from the fires of hell; if you're not baptized then you will go to hell. Some understand baptism to be the means for the forgiveness of sins. Finally, there are those who see baptism as their declaration of accepting Jesus Christ in their lives. They believe that one can only be baptized after having a holy encounter of conversion that leads to faith in Jesus. So, what does baptism mean to you?

We, as Lutherans, have a multifaceted understanding of baptism. We understand baptism as a means to welcome the person being baptized into the body of Christ, but we also understand baptism to be that which cleanses us from the punishment of sin. We also believe that baptism ties us into the death and resurrection of Jesus, which grants us the promise of resurrection and assures us that we will be with God for all eternity. Baptism also anoints us with oil and marks us with the cross of Christ. This is God's way of claiming us as beloved children so that our true identity is grounded in the fact that we are God's beloved. Finally, baptism also grants us the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works to grow our faith in Jesus Christ and helps us to identify how God is calling us into mission as individuals and as a faith community. This is also why we make promises to live a life grounded in faith by teaching others about the good news of Jesus Christ and being examples of God's love in the world.



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However, even though we have this multifaceted understanding of baptism, one area we Lutherans struggle with is living out our calling into God's mission. Often, we live out our faith in a passive way, believing that as long as we come to worship on Sundays, as long as we pray at mealtime, and occasionally we open our Bibles that is enough to live out our faith. And yet, Martin Luther tells us that true faith in the grace of God through Jesus Christ empowers us to live out our faith in a way that loves and serves neighbor.

When we affirm our baptisms, which was done on Confirmation Sunday (and should be done by the congregation at least once every year), we are recommitting to the promises we made to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ through word and deed, to serve all people following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth (all of these promises can be found in our ELWs in the Affirmation of Baptism rite; pg. 237).

Our gospel story today reminds us of the gifts of baptism. Through the story of John's baptism, we are reminded that our own baptism has freed us from the powers of sin so that we can be prepared to live as disciples to the One more powerful that comes after John. From there we are immediately thrust into the story of Jesus' baptism. The baptism of Jesus reminds us of two things. Firstly, that we too are called beloved by God because we have been tied into Christ through baptism. Secondly, that our baptism, like Jesus' baptism, is an anointing into the messianic mission. This means that we have been anointed by God to be the physical representatives of the good news in word and deed in the world.

Thankfully, the good news is that we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of each other, our faith community, so that we are not alone in doing God's mission in the world. The Holy Spirit equips us with a diversity of gifts that we can use to be the proclaimers of good news through word and deed in our wider community. Among our faith community we have prophets, teachers, proclaimers, crafters, laborers, peacekeepers, healers, counselors/advisors, and leaders. Where do you think your gifts lie?

What is also good news is the fact that our baptism sustains us for our entire lifetime. This means that God's forgiveness is always available to us. It means that we will never be separated from God, which means that not even death can forever separate us from God. But this also means that the Holy Spirit is forever with us, which means that while our gifts might evolve or change with time, all of us, regardless of age, can still contribute to the mission of God that we carry out in our community.

Some things we are already doing to spread the love of God in our community. Our Saturday food pantry is a great example of using our gifts to feed the hungry, which is loving and serving neighbor. If you're not at high risk for contracting COVID-19, please consider volunteering to pass out food on Saturday mornings.

While it is difficult to consider other ways we can carry out God's mission while we all have to be isolated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not impossible. For example, one way we can live out God's mission is by



checking in with people whom we haven't heard from in a while. Whether it is a family member, friend, or fellow church member, we can use our phones and computers to check in with others. Perhaps there are other ways we could live out God's mission in the midst of the pandemic. Don't hesitate to let me or any of our council members know if you have an idea and are willing to help make that idea a ministry.

Thankfully, we live in the age of Christ's resurrection, and it is clear that God still has a purpose for the church. This means that, even though we are struggling in the midst of this pandemic, we can trust that God will continue to call us as individuals and as a faith community to carry out God's mission in the world. After all, we are baptized in Christ Jesus, which gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that we can actively respond to God's amazing gift of grace by loving and serving neighbor.

Amen.



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