

Baptism of Our Lord

Isaiah 43:1-7

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The text for the sermon comes from Isaiah:

But now thus says the LORD,

the one who created you, O Jacob,

the one who formed you, O Israel:

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.

For I am the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour....

Because you are precious in my sight,

and honored, and I love you,

Put a bunch of pastors in a room on the Monday morning before the feast day Baptism of Our Lord and what do you get? Stories. Lots of stories. about guess what? About baptisms. I wish you could have heard the conversation at my sermon study this past week.

Because we're all from different denominations, we tend to do it a bit differently from one another. Some of us sprinkle. Some of us dunk. Some of us baptize babies. Some of us baptize grown-ups. Lynne had a story about baptizing a man in a muddy creek at the church picnic. Kathy told of baptizing a passel of Burmese refugees while family members took snaps on their cell phones. I told the story of twelve-year-old Seth whom I baptized right before his confirmation. I ran into his family later in the week at Target and he said, "Thank you for baptizing me, Pastor Jo." My heart about melted. Peter had a story about baptizing a dying gerbil. (And the gerbil lived, so maybe what he actually did was a healing, not a baptism.)

Later that day, I found that Lynne had sent us all a sermon she'd written about baptism some years before. I sent round a sermon in response. And Kathy supplied the link to the Times Union pictures of the Burmese refugees baptism and another link to a sermon from a former seminary professor, Bill Leonard, a sermon on baptism. I read from that now:

When the old institutions won't hold, and the new ones are a long time coming, we go back where we belong. . . to the river, remembering our past to find hope for the future.

Truth is, most churches do not gather at the river anymore. We have taken it inside and toned it down considerably. Some baptisms use minimal amounts of water. We Baptists dip the entire body in heated, fiberglass baptisteries full of fresh water, no muss, no fuss. Perhaps on occasion, we should return to the river, with the congregation gathered all around receiving new Christian brothers and sisters with open arms, drying them off and welcoming them home. I know there are problems of time, space and pollution. In most places, if we baptized folks in the river, we would have to give them a tetanus shot immediately or send them on to heaven that afternoon. Even indoor baptism, particularly by immersion, is an event fraught with dignity and danger and the possibility of unlimited logistical complications. We all have stories.

Once when I was interim pastor of a Kentucky church, a young man named Bob confessed faith in Christ and requested baptism. We talked beforehand of life and faith, death and hope. But not until he entered the water with me on a bright Sunday morning did I realize that Bob was over six feet tall and weighed more than 200 pounds--considerably larger than my 5 foot 6 self. I looked out in the congregation and saw my wife put her hand in her hands, and I knew I was in big trouble. Yet down he went, with the name of God spoken over him. And down I went, too, staggering under the weight. Somehow we got back up, both grateful for grace and unexpected adrenalin, all to a congregation that broke into spontaneous applause in celebration, relief, and good humor.

Perhaps we should always applaud at baptism or shout like our frontier forbearers or do something a little frivolous.

And Kathy wrote in another email: "Yesterday Jo asked for baptismal liturgies. So my complete baptismal formula is usually this:

"Jo Page, upon your profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, I baptize you, my sister, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all" and sometimes depending on how much physical effort is involved in getting the person under and back up, I might say "Buried with Christ in baptism" before they go under and "raised to walk in newness of life" as they come back up. I don't think I shout, but maybe I do."

It's pretty clear to me that pastors like baptizing people. And what's not to love about it?

Third-century church theologian Tertullian said of baptism: "When we are going to enter the water," we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel. Then, when we are taken up, we taste first a mixture of milk and honey. And from that day we refrain from the daily bath for a whole week."

In the early church of Tertullian's time it was adults who were baptized and then only after a period of catechetical instruction. After they were baptized—naked, probably, and it would have been a full-body immersion—the milk and honey drink was meant to mimic mother's milk, the appropriate nourishment for the brand-new child of God. And they were wrapped in a plain white gown called a *tunica alba* or "white tunic." The *tunica alba* was meant to symbolize their purity now that they had been washed clean of all sin and were therefore newly born. I like that symbolism. It's the same reason that funeral palls placed draped over coffins during funerals are white—it's another kind of *tunica alba*. I do think it's kind of silly that the simplicity of the *tunica alba* evolved into the fussy and cumbersome baptismal gown so many babies wear. I always like it when the baby is dressed normally and I don't have to fight the slippery satin and lace. The last thing I want to do is have a baby slide out from between my hands and belly-flop into the baptismal bowl because his mother had felt the need to dress her in a satin ball gown.

But regardless of circumstances or attire, baptisms are unfailingly moving. Because in baptism, we are taken into the heart of God.

That is what our baptisms do. They celebrate and symbolize our places in God's heart. They wash us free from the fear that drives us to destruction—of self, of others, of creation. Our baptisms say "here, here is your place in the body of Christ. Here is your lodging place in the heart of God." Our baptisms say to us, as the prophet Isaiah said:

*For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour....
...you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,*

In our worship this morning, I invite you to remember your baptism. Unlike our Baptist brothers and sisters, most of us cannot remember our baptisms. We were infants, most likely. Possibly we were even asleep at the time!

Yet our baptisms changed our entire lives. And it is worth remembering what those few drops of water sprinkled over our heads while the pastor spoke the redeeming words did for us.

In our baptisms, we drowned into life. We drowned into the freedom to let go, to loosen our grip on our need to control the outcome. We drowned into the floods of grace that tell us nothing can separate us from the love of God. No rules that humans make. No government. No guilt or sorrow. No sickness that corrodes our bodies or ravages our souls. No death that stops our hearts and still our breaths.

Nothing we can do can change what God can do. And the God revealed in Christ promises love and reconciliation, grace unbounded.

Our comfort in Christ is not that we avoid pain and suffering. It is not that we re-construct ourselves as some kind of saint.

Our comfort is that we are freed to be what we have been made to be: the child of God, breathing the breath of God, living in God's world, given the chance to embody, with every cell of our being, God's love.

Again and again, we are offered the assurance and the awareness that God has given us what it takes to live and to love through every coming day and every coming year.

I invite you today to make a palpable remembrance of your baptism. Today, as you prepare to come forward for Holy Communion, or as you pass the peace or even after the service if you'd prefer, walk over to the font. Stand in front of the marble font and let your hand touch the waters of baptism. Reach right into the font. And there you'll find little glass stones, glass stones in blue and white and crystal to mimic the look of water. Retrieve one of those stones and keep it. Take an extra glass stone or two to share with those you love that they may be reminded of their baptisms, too. Keep it in your wallet or your pocket or on your bedside table and let it always remind you that your baptism, you have been flooded by gracious powers, washed in the spring of that grace and declared to be the beautiful, the beloved child of God.

Amen.