



Baptism of Our Lord  
8 January 2023

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

The wise men always come early in our home. Before there were children, when we set up the nativity, I would hide the wise men. They would honor the 12 days of Christmas and not make their appearance until Epiphany on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January. And then like some of our neighbors who would leave their Christmas lights up far too long on the outside of their homes, the nativity – Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, and the wisemen would often overstay their welcome – one year celebrating the resurrection before they finally made their way home by another road as the Bible tells us.

It is no different in the story we hear today of the baptism of Jesus. Last week, Jesus was on his way to Egypt to escape Herod's rage. And in a couple of verses, Joseph was bringing Jesus and Mary back to Nazareth. In the span of one week – we meet Jesus at the tender age of 30 – cresting the hill overlooking the Jordan river preparing to be baptized by his cousin John.

It is worth pointing out that Jesus is not entering the waters of the Jordan river to be baptized as we are baptized. In the days of John, the Baptist – the baptism was for repentance of sins – not for the welcome of God and the promise of eternal life. We might argue that Jesus had no need of a baptism for repentance since he is supposed to be without sin – but Jesus answers the question of “why” before we even can ask the question. John argues with Jesus and Jesus tells him - “Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.” It gets even better, when for just a moment, the identity of God is revealed in the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Son emerges from the water. The Holy Spirit descends like a dove. And the voice of God the Father speaks, “this is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

I have had the privilege of tending more baptisms than I can count in the last 24 years. My very first – a baby girl named Rachel on the island of Oahu – the baptismal font – a clam shell the size of car seat. A thirty something African American man, in California, who stood about 6 foot 7 and was built like a linebacker. When I asked the congregation to welcome the man into the family of God – he picked me up in a bear hug and lifted me at least three feet off the ground. In Idaho a baby boy whose father had been raised Orthodox and whose mother was Lutheran. They wanted their son baptized by immersion in January in Idaho. I bought 3 foot wide clear plastic bowl and filled it with boiling hot water so it would still be warm after the sermon. When it was time for the baptism – the water was too hot. I opened up the side door and grabbed a large handful of snow and dumped it into the water. When the water cooled, we unwrapped the baby from his white towel and a naked baby went into the water and came out of the water in one smooth dive. The collective gasp of the congregation to watch the baby enter the water and come out dripping above my head was a glorious moment of surprise. And here, at this font, a woman in her eighties, a mother and son, a father and son, children of every age – and on the fourth Sunday of Advent a young man named Eli who is still shaking water from his hair – just four weeks later but no doubt basking in the glow of God's promises as his grandfather Jose continues to improve in health after a massive heart attack. I would stir the waters again for each of them and for countless more who will hear God's promise and ask to be baptized.

“Each time someone is baptized,” writes author and pastor Dan Erlander, “God's Word arrives from beyond our expectations, assumptions, hopes, and fears. The work of making this Word live in your heart, head, and whole being belongs to the Holy Spirit. Baptism affirms our place in the ongoing story of God's love. In baptism, the reality of God's presence is experienced through ordinary water and God's Word of promise. The water touches a human body. The Word is heard by human ears. Baptism is a public adoption. God speaks in the presence of witnesses who welcome the newly baptized into the family of God. For Lutheran Christians, all of our freedom, hope, and joy flow out of this baptismal promise.



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“Neither death, nor life,” writes the apostle Paul in the book of Romans, “nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing. At. All. Though many of us believe and many of us have heard that we can be separated from God’s love. How do we get it so wrong? Believing that someone can be separated/alienated/removed from God’s love. Well certainly – we are told. How many of us can speak to hearing someone’s actions have cut them off from God’s love? Certainly - we expect – that there is something we can do or have done that will cause us to be cut off from God’s love. And yet, we hear again, ““Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Sometimes I wonder if that is the only thing every one of our confirmands need to know when they are confirmed on Reformation Sunday each year.

Martin Luther saw baptism “as the sacrament through which we are first received into the Christian community.” Since the church is for all, it follows that baptism, the sacrament of entry, is for all. Luther also saw infant baptism as the purest and most beautiful image of God’s gracious and unconditional love. What infant has served on a committee or done great work. Infants are helpless, needy, dependent, unemployed. “An infant brought to the water for baptism is a sign of how we all come to God – with nothing, absolutely nothing,” writes Luther. So often, we are led to believe, we must accomplish something to keep God loving us. It is not true. God’s love never ends.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup>It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup>Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup>It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. <sup>8</sup>Love never fails.” Contrary to popular belief, 1 Corinthians 13, it’s not just for weddings anymore.

“From the waters I will rise,” writes the poet, “I will rise and walk. Wipe the water from my eyes. Walk with me. Walk with me.” People of God – that is both our hope and God’s promise – always. The baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the wise men may overstay their welcome in our home long after the season of Epiphany has come and gone, but the love of God – is always present – it is the welcome we offer at our front door, it is the welcome we offer in this place, it is the welcome we each encounter at the waters of this font. If you do not believe me, just ask Eli – he will tell you.

In Epiphany, I have taken to the practice of holding this prayer close – for all that enfolds us, holy One, for each word of grace, and every act of care; for those who offer refuge, for each shelter given, and every welcome space; for the healing of our souls, for balm and rest, for soothing and sleep; for vigils kept and for lights kept burning; blessed are you, O Lord our God. Blessed are you. Blessed are we. Blessed am I. Amen.

Thanks be to God! Amen.