

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 13, 2013
First Sunday after the Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 89:20-29
Acts 10:34-38
Luke 3:15-22

Luke's version of the baptism of Jesus is markedly different from the other Gospel writers. I was reminded of that this week as I read Luke, and found myself scratching my head just a bit.

For instance, both Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan River in order to be baptized by John. Matthew further elaborates by showing us John's awkwardness in the situation, when John says to Jesus: "I need to be baptized by *you*, and yet you are coming to me?"

But Luke's account is quite different. There is no mention whatsoever of the location of the baptism. Furthermore, Luke tells us here that John has been put in prison by Herod Antipas, which leads to the question: *Who is baptizing Jesus here?*

I am so familiar with how Matthew and Mark tell the story of Jesus' baptism that I never noticed (until this week) Luke's markedly different telling of the story. Luke seems to subordinate history in order to emphasize a theological point.

And what point does Luke want to emphasize? Well, I don't think he wants to call into question *who* baptized Jesus. Rather, it seems that Luke wants to get

the camera lens off of John and focus it totally on Jesus. Further, Luke is not much interested in the baptism itself, but he *is* interested in what happens immediately afterward. His focus is on the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the voice from heaven that proclaims Jesus as God's "beloved Son."

What Luke seems to want to remind us is that baptism is largely about *identity*. This is true both for Jesus and for us. We discover *who* we are in relation to *whose* we are. *You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter.* In our baptisms, God proclaims to us, "you are my beloved child, and you belong to me."

If we were hard pressed to answer the question, "Who baptizes Jesus here?" we would have to respond that it is the Holy Spirit that baptizes Jesus here. The emphasis is solely on God's gracious activity.

And if we think about the blessing of being God's beloved children in these terms, the wonderful thing about this is that no matter how badly we may mess up, no matter how many times we may fail, *we* cannot destroy this relationship because God is the One who established it. We may deny it; we may run from it; we may try to ignore it. But we cannot alter the reality that we are loved in this way.

At your baptism, God said to you, "you are my beloved child." At your baptism, God promised you that His love for you runs so deep and flows so wide that there is nothing you can ever do to destroy it.

At your baptism God promised you that His grace and mercy would flow anew into your life each day, and that everything you would ever need would be provided by His gracious hand.

Your baptism was a promise from God to you. A promise that come hell or high water, in failure or success, on the mountain top or in the depths, in poverty or wealth, when you mess up or when you get it right, when you see the road ahead of you clearly and when you don't, God your Father will ALWAYS be there for you. Everything else in life may change. Everything else in life may be up for grabs. But not this.

Your baptism was not a "once and done" event. The promise of God, and the grace that comes with it, is as current as right now!

No wonder Martin Luther, in times of stress, would stop and say to himself: "I am baptized!"

And our baptisms should be just as current. Every time you shower or soak in a hot tub, you should say to yourself: "I am God's beloved child, called to make a difference in the world!" When you wash your hands in the sink, or walk outside in the rain, you should say to yourself: "I belong to God, and I am called to make a difference!"

In a moment, we are going to respond to God's wonderful promise to us by renewing our baptismal vows. In simplest terms, we will respond to the God who says, "I love you," by saying: "I love you, too."

And then we will come to the table. As you do, you will walk by the font. The font, filled with water, a tangible sign of God's promise of love. Some of you may want to dip your finger in the water as a reminder of this. Some of you may want to sign the cross on your forehead or chest. For some, just the visual sight of the water may be sufficient. But let this promise of His love fill your soul today.

And then come to His table. Share the meal with your brothers and sisters. And give thanks for love that never ends.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.