

## The Baptism of Our Lord

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

“And a voice came out of the heavens. You are my Son, the beloved, in you I am deeply pleased.”

These final words in Mark's account of Jesus' baptism are the most important words of all. The Voice from heaven identifies, in tones of unexampled affection, with the person undergoing this baptismal experience. “This is my priceless Son, I am deeply pleased with him.” Only twice in the synoptic Gospels does God speak immediately and directly to us from heaven—at Jesus' baptism and at the Transfiguration. At all other occasions God speaks to us mediately through Jesus who is God's Word, God's Epiphany, to us and for us. In this twice repeated direct voice the one *fact* that God wants us to know, above absolutely all the other facts in life, is *how much we have in Jesus*. If we know this, we know the most important fact in the world. “Here,” God is saying in so many words, “in this individual, is everything I want to say, everything I want to reveal, everything I want to do, and everything I want people to hear, to see, and to believe. If you want to know anything about me, if you want to hear anything from me, if you want to please me, get together with him.”

Now, all the kindness, the gracious favor, heard in God's voice for Jesus is conveyed to us in baptism. The Gospel proclaims, and baptism is tactile, performative Gospel, it is wet Gospel, but not watered down Gospel. The Gospel proclaims that the most surprising gift of God is that human beings can have the favor with God that Jesus himself enjoyed as God's anointed and appointed Messiah. The church celebrates this favor and initiates this gracious favor through baptism. Baptism is our adoption, our initiation, our birth into Jesus' family as well as our ordination into his service. In our baptism we astonishingly and ecstatically are allowed to hear the words spoken at Jesus' baptism addressed to us: “You are my beloved and precious child, I am deeply pleased with you.”

Now, God being God, of course has to be a good God. God has to be nice to us, so this nice God will let us pray with an open invitation to hear us. This good God might even share, might even share with us something of the Holy Spirit, but does even a good and nice God have to *like* us, love us? Like us this much? Does God really want us in the family? Can God stand us to be in God's sight, to be completely embraced within God's presence? Can anyone love you, knowing who you really are? “Yes!,” Baptism answers. The simplest meaning of baptism is—God likes us! We need to add another verse to a favorite Sunday School song, “Jesus loves me this I know, for my baptism tells me so.”

In that wet and wildly gracious baptismal event the whole of God's blessing in Christ is delivered to us and it is not watered-down. And the Spirit-drenched, deepest blessing of baptism is that we become as pleasing and as precious and as dear to God as Christ himself. Baptism is more than just getting a wet forehead. In baptism we are placed under and within the triune Name. God's presence is open *to* us, the Spirit is *within* us, Christ stands *by* us and *with* us, the restless heart is given rest at last *in* the very heart of God. The Gospel of baptism is that what was given to Jesus is also given to us, now, in our baptism. As Luther says in one of his sermons on baptism, “This is an absolutely perfect, powerful, mighty saying, 'This is my dear Son,' because everything is inside it, and it summarizes what is in the whole Scripture .... For the words sound as if God

looked all around and yet found no one except this One, and says, 'This is it' as if to say, "Here is finally one person who pleases me and is my dear Son; the others are altogether out ....' Now we must see that this glorious praise and honor is said of Christ for our sake .... *He* doesn't need it .... So it applies to *us*."

When the faith given in baptism is maintained and confirmed, when baptized persons turn to Christ in faith, they recognize that Christ had earlier, already, always turned to them. This always, already turning of Christ *toward* us was first seen at Christmas, then at his baptism *with* us, but most momentously at his suffering and death *for* us. This divine turning toward us is existentially seen or felt *by* us in the evangelical courier delivery system called sacraments. Thus, for example, through baptism Christ becomes alive *in* us and we are alive *in* Christ.

Baptism is the hydrogenated form of the Gospel and infant baptism is its most radical expression, for it emphasizes that God has done it all for us before we are even able to do anything for God, or even for ourselves. There are few things in the church which could celebrate God's unmerited grace quite as much as the sacrament of baptism given to infants. This is bath-time filled with unsurpassable joy, inexpressible grace, and boundless love. Why does Luther, that champion of justification by grace through faith for Christ's sake, leave this lofty theological language and in the Large Catechism so passionately and vehemently fight for and advocate infant baptism? Luther knew that infant baptism celebrated and communicated precisely this theological teaching, the one reality that is more important than anything we do—the prevenient grace of God, of a God who does saving things for people even when they are so very young that all they can do is cry, produce poopy diapers, and spit up.

Happily, infant baptism cannot be spoiled or soiled by any claims of inward or outward good works deserving of grace, or that it was my decision to repent, my decision to accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior, or my decision to let Jesus into my heart. No infant can take any credit for its baptism and its new life in Christ. If appearances do not deceive me, most infants I have baptized were sleeping, a few were crying, and all seemed to be rather bewildered by what is going on. Isn't that wonderful! This ambience of the infant at baptism is so much like the way the rest of us receive the Gospel that it helps us to understand once again that this seemingly common event is God's way of arriving in and into human lives. Luther commented that the scriptures are like the manger which holds the Christ, but one can say that about the baptismal font as well. Baptism looks very much like the manger in which Jesus arrives. Jesus is everything to God, without exception. Now, everything that Jesus receives from God is freely given to us in baptism without exception. Jesus has everything God has to give and God gives us this everything in the gracious event called baptism.

So now after baptism, what do we go on to next? We do not go on to anything at all. Christian life has as its one essential content and practice that we daily return to baptism. In his *Address to the German Nobility* Luther exclaims, "Whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already consecrated priest, bishop, and pope." Someone will need to inform Bishop Sid and Pope Francis. We have been baptized. Their positions have been filled. All the baptized are commissioned, ordained, consecrated, to speak and live the gospel in and to the world.

Our baptism is the last word, the last judgment, an unconditional declaring and establishing of the value we have in God's eyes already. There is nowhere else to go. We are already at the top. After our baptism it is too late for conditional assurances to do better, too late for getting myself and my act together, too late for guilt to be of any use. As the baptized we now have our lives to live *after* the effective hearing of God's final

judgment has been rendered upon us. We are past having anything to lose or to gain; ulterior motivations and mitigations are irrelevant. We are free from all oppressive, accusatory and death-dealing conditionality that we as self-centered sinners still insist to place upon ourselves and others. And we are free for the endless possibilities of mutual love and creativity opened in God's stated promise to us in our baptism.

Our use of baptism is always after the fact. The validity of the promises in our baptism are always, already there for us. Baptism is what the crucified and risen one does to me such that he is always present to me, with me, and for me. Luther in the Large catechism exhorts, "One must use baptism ..., so that when sin or conscience afflict us, we say, 'I am nevertheless baptized, and if I am baptized, I am promised that I shall be made blessed.'"

"And a voice came out of the heavens. You are my beloved daughter, my beloved son, in you I am deeply pleased."

Amen