

Baptism of Our Lord (C)
January 10, 2010
Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Pastor Aaron Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon

Several years ago I had a dog—a little toy fox terrier. His name was Toodie, and through some challenging transitions in life, he was my little buddy. He was lively and energetic, and his favorite thing in the world was chasing tennis balls in the back yard. I could spend hours bouncing a ball of the block wall in the back, and he'd keep chasing it down to bring it back so I could throw it again. Now, if you had visited my house then, you would have seen signs that I had a dog. There was the food dish and water bowl in the kitchen, the doggie bed and blanket in the front room, and, of course, the soggy tennis balls that might be lying around just about anywhere.

I can remember one time—I was in the process of getting ready to move to a new house. One of the last things I did was go around and pick up all of the tennis balls; empty out the water bowl and food dish, and take the doggie bed and blanket out to the truck. I remember Toodie looking at me as if he was wondering what I was doing, and like he was a little worried as well. And I suppose from his point of view it was unsettling for me to be picking up all of his things. For him, they were all signs that he belonged there, signs that he belonged to me and I would take care of him. When we got to our new place, he took a quick sniff around the back yard while I brought his things into the house. But then he came inside and went straight to his doggie bed and laid down. It was as if, with everything changing around him, he treasured every sign that he belonged. This was his place.

Today is one of the festival days of the church year—the Baptism of Our Lord. We celebrate Jesus' baptism. We also remember and give thanks for our own baptisms. And I suppose we could think of baptism as a sign of belonging for us. Maybe not exactly like soggy tennis balls and the water bowl in the kitchen, but a sign all the same. Baptism is a sign for us that we belong. It is a sign that God has made a place for us, a place that is home for us no matter where we are in life. In baptism, we have been forgiven and made part of God's family, a family that stretches throughout the generations and includes people from every part of the world.

Our gospel story for today can help us appreciate some of the richness and beauty of this gift. As Luke tells the story, Jesus' baptism marked for him a time of tremendous change, from being a private person to a public leader. In this transition time, baptism centered him in God's love, and baptism also sent him out, commissioning him to fulfill his God-given role and ministry. Baptism was key in this time of change for Jesus.

It seems to me that change is something we're acquainted with. In fact, it seems to me that change is one of the biggest challenges of our time. It's not just that the world around is always changing, but that the changes come at us faster and faster. Sometimes it feels as if almost everything is unsettled and uncertain. But baptism gives us something that does not change, something we can hold onto, something secure and reliable. Baptism tells us our true identity. In his baptism Jesus heard God declare, "You are my Son, the Beloved." And for us, when we were baptized, God claimed us as beloved children too. You are God's beloved daughter; God's beloved son. You are God's child now and forever. Martin Luther said that whenever he experienced severe attacks of anxiety about God's judgment or his own unworthiness, he learned to look to his baptism as source of strength and comfort, to return to his baptism every day as a gift from God full of assurance that he had a place with God that could not be taken away. Now we may or may not experience anxiety attacks like Luther did, but in the face of everything that is unsettling and anxiety-producing today, we too can return to our baptism as that gift that grounds us, that lets us know who we really are. Baptism says we are loved. Baptism says we are forgiven. In baptism we receive God's Holy Spirit. In baptism we are made part of something so much bigger than our own individual lives—we become part of the family of God and are caught up into God's great work of love for the world.

Let me tell you a little more about my dog. After we got moved into our new house, and after he had hunkered down in his doggie bed for a bit, it wasn't long before he was ready to go again, bringing a soggy tennis ball to me, wanting to chase it in the back yard. It turned out that the new house could be every bit as much a home as the old house. Not only were the doggie bed and blanket portable, and the food dish and water bowl were portable, and the tennis balls were portable. Home was portable too. Wherever I lived, that was his home too.

Our identity as children of God is portable as well. On a Sunday morning we can come to worship and be reminded of our true identity as God's children, and be strengthened in that identity as we hear God's Word and share Christ's supper. And our baptismal identity goes with us as we go home to our family or our job or school, or wherever it is that we're headed with the week ahead and with the rest of our lives. Our baptismal identity goes with us because God goes with us. There is no place that can't be home for us, because our true home is with God.

Baptism was a sending-out for Jesus. It marked the beginning of what he came to do, to embody the love of God for the whole human family. And baptism is a lot like that for us too. As baptized people, we don't just stay here by the font. The life of faith doesn't happen just here in a church

building. The life of faith happens as we go out from here, as people who are deeply rooted in our true identity as beloved children of God, we share some of that love in every relationship that is part of our life. We go out as people who are forgiven, and we bring the power of forgiveness with us. We go out as people who have been touched by God's power for healing, and we go out to be a healing presence in all our relationships. And we don't go out on our own, but God's Spirit goes with us, guiding, strengthening, renewing us. And we don't go out for ourselves, to live our own lives. We go out to be part of what God is already doing in the world—loving, healing, reconciling, giving hope, making all things new. Thanks be to God. Amen