

The Baptism of our Lord, C
Isaiah 42:1-7
Acts 10:34-38
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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On Thursday morning my schedule was chock full of meetings. Two were actually “meetings to plan other meetings” ... which may sound mind-numbing -- but they held gifts I didn’t expect.

The day started here in the library with ten Jewish and Christian leaders brainstorming how Northwest Portland congregations can work together helping homeless and poor and hungry people. Conversation was creative and sincere. Later on, way out in Cornelius, I joined a group of Lutheran pastors who told how their churches are using their buildings to house homeless families, and how in the process their members are learning not to be so afraid of immigrants and refugees. I found myself... energized... encouraged... and I wasn’t the only one. An email came in the afternoon, it read:

“I must admit, I came to the meeting somewhat depressed over the recent chaos our country is struggling with, but I left refreshed, inspired and more at peace, because of all of you. To be able to share our concerns and congregational needs with other people of faith is an uplifting experience, at least for me, and something I truly need and enjoy- thank you all so much.” from Mark

That’s the Spirit at work. On the one hand, a meeting can seem completely ordinary. On the other hand, it can be surprisingly transforming, a living expression of God’s kingdom coming to life. When we have eyes to see, we are able to notice holiness in ordinary things and sense how God’s Holy Spirit is always relentlessly moving ahead.

I find that one of the toughest challenges in Christian faith is the challenge to believe in the power of goodness and love, while living in a world that often testifies to powers of deception and greed and cruelty. Our nation and world are facing real challenges today, yet we are also buffeted by political “spin” that can produce a kind of moral vertigo. It makes the truth elusive, increases distrust, and reinforces divisions.

In a culture like this, it can be very hard to believe in the power of good and the power of love. Yet we Christians do believe God is good. We believe God created this universe and called it “good.” We believe God loves this good creation, loves us, and cares what happens to us – all of us, even the planet itself.

Our proof of God's goodness is God's own Son, who was born among us and didn't shy away from even the most terrible human pain, who even went through death, so he could rise out of death and connect us to our Creator forever.

Some days we could name a thousand different reasons to be cynical, or to despair, but we also have this one shining image of Jesus Christ to give us perspective in the struggle. God loves us -- and God loves the world -- no matter what. And God is always working, mysteriously, relentlessly, to heal this universe and make it new.

This morning, scripture gives us another reason to believe in goodness and love. And that reason is baptism. Baptism brings God's love close to home for each one of us. As it was for Jesus long ago, it is for us today.

Baptism is one definite point in our lives when God reaches out to touch each one of us and claim us and assure us that we have value and are loved. God reaches out to say, *"This precious person is mine. I take her into my family. I claim her in love. I wash her with water. I mark her with the cross. She belongs to me and can never be parted from me."* And in that moment, in that event of baptism, we find out who we really are, and how things really are.

Some of us may remember our baptisms, others may not, but God's love remains true. Baptism shows us who we really are. In baptism God says to us: *"I value you infinitely. I call you precious. I call you beautiful. I make you my own. I give you the life that truly is life."*

I personally appreciate how definite baptism is. Because my own opinion of myself is very changeable. Sometimes I feel capable and strong, other times I feel weak and lost. In one area of life I may consider myself successful, while in another area I may feel like a complete failure. Sickness or stress or trouble can cause me to doubt myself and doubt my place in the world.

That's when baptism comes as a wonderful word of truth from outside myself. An objective truth. A wider, stronger word from God that overshadows all my fickle opinions. Baptism tells me that whether I am pleased with myself or disgusted with myself, God accepts me. Whether I am brave or scared, God loves me. Whether I am wise or foolish, God values me. No matter how I judge myself and no matter how the world judges me, God claims me as God's own. God treasures me because I am God's beloved child. Definitely not perfect, but always precious in God's sight. That's who I am in baptism. That's who you are in baptism, too.

In baptism, God comes to each of us with words like those beautiful ones from Isaiah. Just let this wonderful "Fear Not" message wash over you, a love poem from God:

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...
Because you are precious in my sight,
And honored, and I love you...
Do not fear, for I am with you.

Take these words home with you today. Read them in the morning when you wake up, read them in the evening when you settle down to rest. Let God's love wash over you and cleanse you and comfort you and give you courage. Let God's love remind you who you really are. Treasured. Honored. Forgiven. Embraced. At every moment. In every circumstance. Now. And forever.

Let your imagination help you experience the reality of God's love. I know a man who swims for exercise, and when he's doing the backstroke, he imagines himself surrounded by the waters of God's baptismal love. He feels waters of love holding him up, waters of love washing over him, waters of love refreshing him and giving him enjoyment and even leading him to better health.

When you're standing in the shower some morning, remember your baptism. Welcome that warm, wonderful water that soothes your skin and makes you feel new. Give God thanks for the luxury of having all that abundant water, right in your home! And give God thanks even more that you're blessed with the abundant love of God every day, abundant, ever-flowing, supporting your life.

Martin Luther knew how to remember his baptism. He needed to, because throughout his life he wrestled with depression and anxiety. Back in the 1500's they didn't call it depression, but I'm sure Martin's dark times were no different than ours today. And when those personal demons threatened him, it's said that Luther would actually shout out loud: *"No! I am baptized! I am saved! I belong to God, not to you demons!"* Luther depended on God's promises for protection and strength. We can lean on our baptism this way, too. When our own demons threaten, whatever they may be, we can let God's love push back the darkness. We can say, *No, I am God's person. It's God's love that rules in my life.* And indeed that is so.

In my own case, making the sign of the cross has become a meaningful way to remember baptism. When I worship or pray, I cross myself to remember the cross that was traced on my forehead when God claimed me in baptism. The cross tells us who we really belong to. We belong to Christ, now and forever. And we carry this cross with us wherever we go, for security and strength and help.

Another wonderful way to remember is to celebrate the anniversary of our baptisms-- like a second birthday, which it really is. A family might take a child's baptismal candle down from the shelf and light it on the dinner table, saying prayers of thanks and blessing. If you don't know your baptismal birthday, I encourage you to find out. Call the church where you were baptized – I did a few years back and they were happy to help. It was Ebenezer Lutheran Church in Columbia, South Carolina. December 11, 1960. That's the day when God claimed me and made me God's own.

Somehow knowing the date we were baptized makes it more real. Makes us more sure of who we really are-- not a pastor or businessperson or teacher or accountant, not a mother or father or grandparent, not a wife or husband or friend. Who we really are is a child of God. Accepted by God because God chooses to love us. Loved by God not because of anything we do, but because of what God has done for us. Treasured with God's kindness. Supported by God's help. Now and always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.