

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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The Baptism of our Lord
January 14, 2007
Isaiah 43:1-7

“Lessons for Living From a Baptism”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

In our service planning these last weeks, we have exercised a little change from the church calendar. Because of the importance of the occasion we celebrated Epiphany last Sunday which was technically the First Sunday after Epiphany. And this week, because it is another important and meaningful day, we observe the Baptism of our Lord. Now the introduction of Lutheran Service Book as our new hymnal and the revised readings connected with it present an opportunity for me to preach on a text I have never used before. The Gospel lesson for today presents in very brief words the account of the Baptism of Jesus. It is the familiar story of the descent of the Holy Spirit like a dove and the proclamation of the Father's voice from heaven, "You are my beloved Son, with You I am well pleased." The Baptism of our Lord is considered the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and the announcement of the same. But in the application of this text, the Old Testament lesson for today from the 43rd chapter of Isaiah presents us with an opportunity to see some new "Lessons for Living from a Baptism" and that will be our theme for today. May the Spirit of God descend on us through His word as we consider this theme.

I. We are God's

It is not that the words of this text are unfamiliar to me. In fact, I was quite surprised to discover that I had never preached on them as a text. I remember distinctly an evening devotion in the dormitory at the seminary in St. Louis during my first year there as a student. (About 33 years ago!) The now sainted Dr. Edwin Weber, the first vice-president of the Missouri Synod, led a devotion for us students and I have not forgotten it to this day. He based it on the opening words of this text. The first lesson we can learn is that "we are God's own people." The words of the prophet are the Lord's encouragement and direction to his people Israel. But they are equally applicable to us as God's people today. But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." The language of the opening address to Jacob and Israel is rooted in the biblical concept of creation. The word for create is the same word used in Genesis 1 for the creation of the world from nothing by the power of the word of God. The word "formed" is the same word used in Genesis 2 for the creation of Adam from the dust of the ground. The Lord created you, the Lord has formed you.

And then the Lord says, "Fear not!" That familiar phrase occurs often in the Scripture. For our lives our often filled with fear and uncertainty. But the Lord reminds us: "I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine." What a beautiful and comforting series of thoughts in this sentence. We are redeemed, that is, bought at a price. We are

called by name. We are not just a number in a list or a minuscule dot in the vastness of the universe. The Lord knows us by name. In fact he has given us that name. And we belong to him. The connection with baptism is very striking. As St. Paul teaches us in the Epistle for today, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." We are baptized into Christ, into his death and resurrection. We belong to him. And the name we receive is not just our given name, but his name as well, the name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "Fear not. I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine."

II. Through the storms of life, God is there

The following verses of our text remind us that through the storms of life, God is there. The prophet writes, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." These words may be a reference in remembrance of the Israelites crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan River, of their sojourn in the burning desert. Or it may be a prophecy of their journey into exile, over the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris, through the burning desert. Perhaps there is in these words an anticipation of the journey of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fiery furnace. But the Lord's promise stands firm and sure: "I will be with you."

Now we may not find ourselves overwhelmed in the waters or walking through the fires, but our lives are still filled with trouble and distress with pain and difficulties. We sometimes seem so alone. And that is when we need to hear these words from our Lord: "I will be with you ... For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior, ... and I love you." God will not forsake us in the trials of life. He will be there. Once again, St. Paul adds a baptismal connection that not even death itself can separate us from Christ: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ... Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died, he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God." Our Lord Jesus in his baptism began his ministry which culminated in his death upon the cross for our sins (He died to sin for us!) And the victory is ours in his glorious resurrection. He lives for us and we live in Him! As our text says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.: As the Psalmist says, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me."

III. Gathered as His people.

The final lesson for living from our text for today is this: "We are gathered as His people." Again the Lord begins with a Fear not! "Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your

offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." In this summary statement is a recapitulation of what has been said. The Lord gathers his children from the east and west, from the north and south (from all over the earth) He brings them to himself.

In this prophecy of Isaiah, there is probably a hint of the promise of return to the children of Israel from captivity, but there is a greater promise of the gathering of all the Lord's people to be his forever. For everyone who is called by name, who is created for my glory, formed and made will be gathered. There are those words of creation again, created, formed, and made. There is God saying not just that he calls us by our name, but that he calls us by his name as well. He gathers us together. In our lives we are never alone. For we are never separated from God but we are part of his body as well, his people, his church. The redeemed of the Lord who have been washed in the waters of baptism and cleansed in the blood of Christ. And the Apostle says something very similar again in connection with baptism, but this time from the letter to the Galatians: For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male of female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. We are the Lord's both now and forevermore. Those are some good lessons for living from a baptism. As one of the new hymns in the hymnal puts it so well:

O Christian, firmly hold this gift
And give God thanks forever!
It gives the power to uplift
In all that you endeavor.
When nothing else revives your soul,
Your Baptism stands and makes you whole
And then in death completes you.

In Jesus Name. Amen.