

First Sunday After Epiphany – Baptism of Our Lord
January 13, 2008

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3:13-17

The first Sunday after Epiphany is always the day we read about the Baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan. It becomes a great day to focus on the sacrament of Holy Baptism, and an even better day to have baptisms. Today, we get to do all three because in just a little while we will be baptizing Wren Violet Stephens. Welcome to her and all her family gathered here to share this day with her parents and godparents.

One way to describe a sacrament like baptism is to say that it is an outer means for communicating an inner reality, or to put it another way, it is a tangible way to communicate an intangible truth. Baptism, the Water together with the Word, communicate an intangible, transformative truth about our relationship with God. Just what that transformation is, is the source for some discussion. And the opportunity for one of the better Ole jokes I have ever heard, that Emily passed along to me not too long ago.

When Ole quit farming and moved, he discovered he was the only Lutheran in his new town of all Catholics. That was okay, but the neighbors had a problem with his barbecuing beef every Friday. They were not allowed to eat red meat on Fridays, but the tempting aroma was getting the best of them. Beside themselves, they got together and confronted Ole.

"Ole," they said, "since you are the only Lutheran in this whole town and there's not a Lutheran church for many miles, we think you should join our church and become a Catholic." Ole thought about it for a minute and decided they were right. Ole talked to the priest, and they arranged it.

The big day came, and the priest had Ole kneel. He put his hand on Ole's head and said, "Ole, you were born a Lutheran, you were raised a Lutheran, and now," he said as he sprinkled some incense over Ole's head, "you are a Catholic!"

Both Ole and the neighbors were happy. But the following Friday evening, the aroma of grilled beef still wafted from Ole's yard. The neighbors went to talk to him about this, and as they approached the fence they heard Ole saying something strangely familiar to the steak: "You were born a beef, you were raised a beef, and now" he said as he sprinkled salt over the meat, "you are a fish!"

Well, I don't think that is exactly what will be happening to Wren Violet this morning, but baptism does change things, it does make a difference in our lives, and we could probably talk about it in three ways.

First of all, by our baptism, we are joined with the death and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, in the Lutheran tradition especially, there are three times when we focus particularly on our baptisms: at the event of our baptism, when we affirm our baptisms at the time of our Confirmation, and at our funeral.

Practically the very first thing that is said at a funeral is, “When we were baptized in Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” I know that some of you here this morning have recently lost loved ones. I hope, I pray, that those funerals included a strong affirmation of this baptismal promise. It is the source of comfort and hope to us in some of the darkest moments of our lives.

The second thing that changes when we are baptized is that we become a part of the Body of Christ. We become a Christian. It may not be that significant to Wren Violet right now, but as she grows up, as we all grew up, it will begin to be part of her identity. Being Christian, being part of the Body of Christ is first of all to be part of something bigger than yourself. It is to be part of God’s plans for the world. It is to have a role, a place in God’s kingdom. And hopefully that makes a difference in how you live your life. I hope that people think us a little weird for the way we choose to live life because we are Christians. It ought to make us different than the rest of the world.

And the third thing that happens in our baptism is usually expressed in the images of having our sins washed away, of being made a child of God, and is part of our Gospel text for today, Jesus’ baptism at the river Jordan. Jesus is baptized by John, and as he comes up out of the water, a dove descends and a voice from heaven says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” That’s what happens in baptism, God says of each one of us, This is my beloved daughter, this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” And the promise that we have in baptism is that that is for keeps. Nothing is going to change that.

There is a wonderful passage in a book entitled “If Grace is True” by Gulley and Mulholland that expresses the power and truth of this image beautifully. The author writes, “When my son was five we were preparing to attend some function where we all needed to be well dressed. We gave my son a bath and put on his nicest clothes, and then my wife and I began to prepare ourselves. Our son, bored and impatient, asked to go outside and play. We finally gave in but made it clear he was not to get dirty. He promised to be good. About five minutes after he went outside, our doorbell rang. I went to the door. Standing at our door step was our neighbor and a little boy with mud caked from the very top of his head to the tip of his toe. He had tried to jump over a mud puddle and failed. Our neighbor asked, ‘Is this your son?’ For a moment I thought about saying no. But grace won out. I took him by the hand and led him upstairs to his second bath. I claimed him, and I cleaned him. His filthy condition did not change our relationship. Indeed it only emphasized how much he needed me.”

What we have in our baptism is the promise that no matter what happens in our life, no matter how big a mess we make of our lives, God will claim us, and clean us. God will call us “my beloved child” – no matter what.

That is pretty radical. Especially when you think about that fact that that is true for everyone else around me too. Even people I don’t like too much, People I think of as the bad people. People who hurt people, abuse or exploit people, especially children. God looks at them, and sees past all the mess they made of their lives, and God calls them

Beloved Child too. That's how amazing God's capacity to love and forgive is. No matter what, God will say of each of us, "you are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter."

That is the simple, yet powerful-beyond-belief truth that is made tangible in the waters of our baptism. No one is beyond God's capacity to love and forgive. No matter what, God has said to you, and to me, as God will say to Wren Violet today, "You are my beloved child, with you I am well-pleased. Thanks be to God. Amen