

BPT.C1  
William J. Sappenfield  
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THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD  
January 10, 2010  
Isaiah 43:1-7  
Acts 8:14-17  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

### **Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

<sup>21</sup>Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Today is the annual celebration of The Baptism of Our Lord; it is always celebrated on the first Sunday after Epiphany. The paraments are white and the Gospel lesson tells how Jesus was baptized. We remind ourselves that Jesus was baptized; that reminds us of the significance of our own baptism. The awe-inspiring story we read from the Gospel of Luke, is part of the story we all share.

Dictionaries tell us that the word *christening* is a synonym for the word *naming*. We have even extended the definition to inanimate objects, so we *christen* ships and businesses to give them a name and to get them started. But, like so many words, that is not how the word *christening* began. Throughout history (or at least the last thousand years) a person was christened with the water of baptism. That does not mean he received his own name. It means he received Christ's name.

All three of the lessons we have for this morning are about the gift of bearing God's name in a world that needs to know God.

In our first lesson from Isaiah, the prophet speaks to the people of Israel at the lowest point in their history – the Babylonian exile. They have been conquered and carried off to Babylon. They have been taken from the land God promised them and cut off from the temple of Jerusalem. At best, these events could be seen as God's judgment on sinful people. At worst, it could be seen as the Lord of Israel being defeated by Babylon's god, Marduk. Either way, the future was bleak for the people of Israel. Isaiah responded by proclaiming that God is alive and well and will restore his people. The words are, "Do not fear, 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 them up,' and to the south, 'Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away 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." Everyone who is called by my name.

People who are made and redeemed by God are not known by their name. They are known by God's name.

This is a powerful promise that Isaiah spoke, but it is not controversial. At least it is not controversial among God's people. We have clearly identified good guys and bad guys and God will restore the good guys. Isaiah might be called a dreamer, but nobody would disagree with what he was praying for.

The second lesson is more problematic. In this case, not everybody thought God's promise was a good idea. It is a problem we still have today. It is the question: "Exactly which people does God call by name?" Back in Isaiah's day, he had said that all the nations would come to worship the Lord in Jerusalem (Isa. 60). Jesus, himself, had said that he was "sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". But just before his

ascension, Jesus said, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witness in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). God wants his name on everybody drawing breath – and that is a group that includes some unsavory characters. Acts reads: “Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.” The apostles were in Jerusalem. Isaiah had promised hundreds of years before that the people who are called by God’s name would be restored to Jerusalem. They were living the fulfillment of that promise. But now word came that people in Samaria accepted the word of God. This was troubling news. They sent Peter and John to investigate.

Peter and John give a wonderful example for us. The Bible tells us that they did not go to Samaria and question those people’s right to be called by God’s name. They went to Samaria “and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit”. Those people had a new name and it came with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

This is the mission we have because of the ministry of Jesus. The ministry of Jesus began with his baptism.

The gospel tells us that when Jesus was baptized he prayed and he saw the Holy Spirit descend upon him as a dove. A voice from heaven said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Those words quote two Bible verses that have very different messages, and they emphasize a savior who has two very different qualities. “You are my Son” quotes Psalm 27, a song that was to be sung at the coronation of the King of Israel. It is a celebration of the power of God on earth. “With whom I am well pleased” quotes Isaiah’s (42:1) first Servant Song. When God spoke to Jesus at his baptism he recalled the power of a king, and the duty of a servant. This Christ has the power to call his people, and the name he gives us is “servants of God”.

We are christened; we bear the name of Christ. We are given the inspiration of royalty and the mission of being servants. Baptized people serve God. It is no accident that Jesus is baptized at the *beginning* of his ministry; baptism is not a conclusion, it is the way we live as children of God. Baptism is more than an event; it is a way of life.

We make the sign of the cross to remind ourselves that we are baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. That is the way we begin our worship services. It is suggested that we begin each day in the same manner. In *The Small Catechism*, Martin Luther writes in the section titled “Morning and Evening Prayer”: “In the morning, as soon as you get out of bed, you are to make the sign of the holy cross and say, Under the care of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen” Live everyday like a baptized person who bears the name of God. Elsewhere in *The Catechism* Luther writes that baptism “signifies that daily the old person in us with all our sins and evil desires is to be drowned through sorrow for sin and repentance, and that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

Baptism is God’s promise to restore his people and strengthen us in hard times and in suffering. The promise he made through Isaiah to his people in captivity in Babylon.

Baptism inspires the confidence to let God name his children with his grace and acceptance that goes beyond anything we are capable of. It gives us the strength to pray for people we might not know and we might disapprove of and we might be afraid of. People like those strangers Peter and John prayed for and laid their hands on.

And baptism names us as God’s powerful heirs and as his loyal servants. We are baptized by the same God who baptized Jesus. God says to us, we are his beloved children with us he is well pleased.

The words to Jesus were not just a private revelation that reassured Jesus of God's love. The Holy Spirit empowered the soul-saving ministry that would follow. In the same way, your baptism is not just insurance that God's grace will give you a place in heaven after you die. It is the assurance that your life is part of eternity now.

Someday you will meet Jesus; that is a wonderful promise. Today you already bear his name and you speak that name everyday you live.