

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
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The Baptism of Our Lord B – January 10, 2021
Genesis 5:1-5, Psalm 29, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:1-11

Grace to you and peace, from God the Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ. C: Amen,

We have come to the annual observance in the church year of the Baptism of Our Lord. I can still remember when that jostled my mind for the first time. I had learned in the Apostles' Creed that we believe in "baptism for the remission of sins." It was quite some time ago when I learned that, so it was "remission," rather than "forgiveness" of sins that we received in baptism. But then I also had learned about Jesus, at once fully human and fully divine. But, despite being human, he was sinless. So, suddenly, something clicked for me: why did Jesus have to be baptized if he was sinless? I asked, and recall having been told that his was a different kind of baptism, not like ours. That didn't explain things for me, but I was on my own to figure it out

In time, I learned that various types of washing were frequently used in religious practices in the Judaism of Jesus' day. And, also in time, I studied the presentations of Jesus' baptism in the three synoptic gospels and I recognized that they all presented that event as the first step in his public ministry. So I thought that maybe the purpose of Jesus' baptism was to present him and his ministry to the public. The baptism John offered was a familiar practice, and many people had come to be baptized themselves.

Then I came upon this statement in a commentary written just this week by Pastor David Lose:

Yes, baptism promises the forgiveness of sin. But... it also offers the constant blessing of God's affirmation of us as a beloved child. ... [We] can ... [receive] that blessing ..., reminding ... [ourselves] that the words from the voice in heaven addressed to Jesus are also addressed to us: "You are my child, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." It['s] these words that start Jesus' ministry. These words that equip him to deal with temptation. These words that orient his mission and anchor his ministry. These words that give him an unassailable identity that makes, well, everything else possible.

www.davidlose.net/2021/01/baptism-of-our-lord-b-a-bigger-baptism

“The constant blessing of God’s affirmation of us as a beloved child.” Yes. That certainly is true. And it explains Jesus’ baptism so well. Even though our baptism is for the forgiveness of sins, it also is a constant blessing of God’s affirmation of **us** as beloved children. **This** is our primary identity in life. But how often do we forget all about it and define our identity by means of other personal characteristics and traits?

I think that’s been happening for some time for us here in the US. With the arrival of the COVID-19 virus, we’ve been thinking of ourselves in risk categories (you know, people over 65, those with underlying medical conditions, essential workers, and so forth). These are important and necessary identities to stay safe and healthy. But they are **not** our baptismal identity.

This past year or two, many of us have been thinking of ourselves in terms of our political affiliations. That also was an important and necessary identification in the time of a presidential election. But again, it was **not** our baptismal identity.

Due to the continued police violence against unarmed Black and Brown people, many people have come to identify themselves primarily by their bodies, into groups they belong to. Again, that is not only an important and necessary. But again, it’s **not** our baptismal identity.

What has this kind of self-identification done to us? It has continued to divide us. Our membership in various groups hasn’t given us a means to overcome the increasing divisions between the people in this country.

We heard on Wednesday – the day of the Epiphany of Our Lord – about the storming of our country’s Capitol building by mobs of angry, armed, violent, white supremacist insurrectionists who sought to prevent the peaceful transfer of presidential power from their hero, President Trump, to President-elect Biden. Death resulted: one terrorist was killed in the Capitol and one Capitol Police Officer died from injuries he sustained in the riot. And three people died from medical emergencies that couldn’t be treated because of the rioting. The insurrectionists left – mostly without having been stopped by law enforcement personnel. And the election of Joe Biden as President and Kamala Harris as Vice President were finally and fully acknowledged by Congress.

Where does this leave us? Well, if we receive the blessing of being part of God’s family by virtue of our baptism, that must mean that **everyone** who has been baptized is part of that family, right? Pastor Lose contends – and I agree with him –

that the blessing “comes with a responsibility and invitation – to see others as also beloved of God and treat them accordingly.” (*Ibid.*).

How do we carry out that responsibility? What do we say when we think that people are behaving unjustly? How do we respond when people want to take our freedom or our health or our life? How do we deal with that? It seems to me that we first of all, hold people accountable – as we expect to be held accountable – for their actions.

Investigation of the overtaking of the Capitol are proceeding and arrests are being made. The people who carried out the attack are being prosecuted. It is unclear what will occur with respect to President Trump and his incitement of the people gathered. You may have learned that our Presiding Bishop joined the other leaders of the member denominations of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA in an open letter to Vice President Pence, Members of Congress and the Cabinet, calling for the removal of President Trump from office. This is based upon his actions and words that “have endangered the security of the country and its institutions of government by inciting a violent, deadly, seditious mob attack.” ([OPEN LETTER TO VICE PRESIDENT PENCE, MEMBERS OF CONGRESS, AND THE CABINET CALLING FOR THE REMOVAL OF PRESIDENT TRUMP FROM OFFICE \(nationalcouncilofchurches.us\)](https://www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us/open-letter-to-vice-president-pence-members-of-congress-and-the-cabinet-calling-for-the-removal-of-president-trump-from-office)) The letter also recognizes “the need to hold responsible not only those who invaded the Capitol, but also those who supported and/or promoted the President’s false claims about the election, or made their own false accusations.” (*Ibid.*)

This is the work of justice, and the Lord has called us for millennia to live with leaders who rule with justice and righteousness. Those of us studying Isaiah read about this just this week. (Isaiah 33:5).

And then we speak the truth, in love, to convey the gospel. It appears that thousands of people believe the lies that Donald Trump told about the presidential election having been marked by fraud. How can we reach them to communicate the truth? Jesus tells us that he is the truth. (John 14:6) and that the truth will make us free (John 8:32).

We can look to Paul and his campaign to spread the gospel among people in Asia to find a way to carry out our “beloved child of God” obligations. Just after the lesson we heard today from Acts about Paul baptizing twelve believers in the name of Jesus in Ephesus, we learn that Paul taught for three months in the synagogue there, and then in a hall in a nearby town. He explained the kingdom of God and how Jesus was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. When people didn’t

accept the gospel, he moved on to other areas, teaching for two years, “so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.” (Acts 19:1-10.)

Of course, we know that we are called as Christians to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and to teach people to obey everything Jesus has commanded us. (Matthew 28:19-20,) We know that we can proclaim the gospel in our actions as well as with our words. We just have to keep at it, like Paul did. We have to continue to point to Jesus as the source of our salvation and peace. So how will we act toward people we disagree with, but who are also beloved children of God?

Can we see people who differ from us – even violently – on important issues as fellow children of God? And beloved by God? Can we act toward them with the love of Christ? That is what God calls us to do. That is our question today as we remember that we, like Jesus, are children of God. It is a challenge. A great challenge. But we know that if we seek God’s guidance and Jesus’ accompaniment in Spirit, nothing is impossible. And, with our commitment to reach people who disagree with us with the gospel, we stand to have a world that is more like heaven than is the current one.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: Amen