

“Cousins Wading into Waters of Death – Waters of Life”

The Baptism of our Lord – Year A

January 9, 2005

Matthew 3:13-17, Isaiah 42:1-9, Acts 10:34-43

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen. The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this festival of the Baptism of our Lord.

Last Saturday we were watching a PowerPoint presentation featuring family pictures of weddings from the Samp-Pauletto clan when our son, Jacob, got down on one knee and proposed to Laura Pauletto and she agreed to marry him. Now you know why we weren’t here last week! We are so delighted to welcome Laura into our family and it was really an exceptional time to share with her wonderful parents, siblings, Aunt, Uncle& cousins.

When Laura’s grandparents were married back in 1947 they went on their honeymoon to the Alpine Resort in Egg Harbor, Wisconsin. I couldn’t believe it. I used to go swimming there every summer with my cousin Margie. After a hard day’s work in the fields my Aunt Edna or Uncle Wilmer would drive us to swim in the waters of Green Bay. My cousin, Carol, was a waitress at the Alpine. Cousins wading into the water – that is where our Gospel comes to life this week where waters of life led to death and then life eternal for us.

The Baptism of our Lord in Matthew includes a family squabble. Cousin John (the Baptist) tells Jesus that there’s something wrong with this plan – he shouldn’t be baptizing Jesus – it should be the other way around. I wonder how often John had heard about how he’d leapt in his mother’s womb when not-even-showing Mary came to visit. Oh, it was clear to John just *Who* Jesus was. When John consented and baptized Jesus and the voice like thunder came from the heavens as the dove descended and he heard, “This is my beloved Son...” as the water washed and Jesus came gasping up for air – how John must have gasped in awe and praise and the incredible fullness of the moment – God become flesh there in his arms – a man who left that river dripping to begin His ministry, to face the devil in the wilderness, to heal, to teach, to share, to die – water bringing death.

But more came with this revealing, this keeping to the “fulfill(ing) of all righteousness.” Isaiah prophesied that this “chosen servant upon whom I have put forth my spirit (will) bring forth justice to the nations...a bruised reed my servant will not break...until he has established justice in the earth.” Interesting little phrase there in between the justice for the nations – the Gentiles – all people. “A bruised reed my servant will not break.” Commentator Gerhard Linn says of these words, “This image draws on a symbolic act during a court case when a death sentence was proclaimed and the execution was about to take place. The sentenced person would see the judge break a reed. This gave the sign that the person would be executed. Imagine the situation of such a person. There is no hope, no future, but then the unexpected happens! The judge does not break the reed...Grace is proclaimed. A new beginning is possible. That is what God's justice is about. God in his infinite love does not do to us what we deserve but gives us what we

need...All people - most of all those who have lost all hope - need to hear the great and good news: God offers all the chance for a new beginning."

The "bruised reed" is the one that is ready to snap, to break – and, if you think of it – whether you are at that breaking point or not – if the weight of the world, of your sins, your ill health, your pile of bills, your unfinished work has gotten you feeling bruised – well, there's no reason that reed shouldn't snap, no reason that judgment shouldn't be pronounced – none, except that God, in God's grace, chooses not to snap your reed or mine because the Lamb of God has taken away the sins of the world. Jesus came up out of that water to death so that we might have life – life to the full, life abundantly, and so that we might bring His justice to light.

The themes and visuals of Epiphany – light and darkness, justice and injustice, the texts for the season and this day, they all add up to tremendous images of what God wants to accomplish through us in our very broken world. In our lesson from Acts Peter said, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who is God-fearing and does what is right is acceptable to God." God's love is impartial – He loves all the people of all the nations of the world. Salvation is available to all who will believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord. God's love is, literally, "liberal" according to a Time Magazine test you can take online. If you answer, "I think the government should treat the lives of its citizens as equal to those of other countries" you are "liberal" politically, as are cat lovers (according to the survey).

As people of the Epiphany – light bearers reflecting the light of Christ, we are compelled by the love of Christ to see all people of the world as those whom God desires to love, and, if not as a nation, as individuals and a congregation to come to the aid of all the people whose lives have been devastated – Christian and non-Christian alike. Mercy, healing mercy, must flow from us through our sacrificial gifts to the Basta family in Egypt, the Congolese here in our building, the children of Central Lutheran who take home backpacks of food for the weekend so that they have something to eat - our involvement in local and global acts of mercy in every possible way.

St. Paul wrote: "Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Romans 6:3-5a Water bringing death – that's what baptism is all about. Like those cousins, John and Jesus we wade into the water to death and then to life.

Paul finished his thought to the Romans saying "If we have been united with Him in His death, we will certainly be united with Him in His resurrection." (Romans 6:5b)

Raised from baptism into newness of life we are called, in love, to walk together as members of Jehovah, as part of our larger community of faith and to walk together in trust. We are called to walk with our hand in Christ's hand and to walk together as sisters and brothers in Christ while extending that hand to all in need.

There is a story of a black family and a white family who lived in the area of Atlanta during the time of the racial riots and uprisings of the 60's.

The day had come when the black family and the white family were told that their children would be in an integrated school. Both sets of parents had tears in their eyes as they sent their children to school. "Just remember, you are a child of God" the parents said to their respective girls.

That night the parents of the two little girls were very anxious to hear how the day went for their little girls. They received the same story when asked, "Well, what happened?" The girls shared the same story, "You wouldn't believe this, but I had to sit next to a girl all day of the opposite color. We just stared at each other for a while. We had to walk together to the restroom, to gym class, and even had to sit next to each other during lunch." "Well, were you afraid?" asked the parents. "I was so afraid and the other girl was so afraid that we just held hands all day long!"

On this day of the Baptism of our Lord, wet in the waters that have set us free to live as God's children of light, hope, and faith, assured through our own baptism, and gathered around God's Word and about to come to the Lord's table, please hold hands with the sisters and brothers in Christ sitting next to you in the pews this morning as we pray:

God of all mercy and grace, look with favor upon our efforts to reach out to all who are in need, all who suffer from injustice, all who do not yet know of the love you have shown through your Son, Jesus Christ, who came to fulfill all righteousness and earn our salvation. Grant that we, who have been brought through the waters of baptism from death into life might carry that the Good News of that life and light to others. In Jesus' name.           AMEN

Now may Almighty God who has filled the world with the Light of His incarnate Word, empower us by His grace to reflect His light and love in all that we do.