

Immersed + Renewed + Flooding
Sermon for Baptism of Our Lord Sunday
by *The Rev. Alex Zuber*
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May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

As we gather around the Word on this ‘Baptism of Our Lord’ Sunday, and we hear again the story of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River, a question comes to mind. Whose baptism are we supposed to talk about today? Obviously, the name of the day is “Baptism of Our Lord”, so it would make sense to talk about the significance of Jesus being baptized. On the other hand, it would seem that this Sunday offers us a wonderful opportunity to remember our own baptisms. Perhaps, we can strike a balance between both opportunities in observing this festival day.

The Baptism of Jesus is a significant event in the life of Christ and in the movement of the Gospels. This was the moment that was the launching point for Jesus’s ministry. It seems odd, that we hear just a few weeks ago in our church year that Christ was born, and now here he is, most likely in his early thirties, and he’s being baptized. We can only guess what happened in between. We know pieces of the story, such as the flight to Egypt, the child Jesus teaching in the temple, and that, as Luke’s Gospel says, he “increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” It could be fun to guess what happened in those years and what it would have been like to be a childhood friend of the messiah. But we know today, that Christ’s baptism was the true beginning of his ministry.

It began in those waters. Jesus was Baptized by John with the understanding that “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” In this act Jesus began a life dedicated to the pursuit of righteousness, of grace, and of finally burying the “Old Adam”, or the sinful nature of humanity that began in the Garden with Adam all the way back in Genesis. The righteousness that Jesus would share and show was the righteousness that could sanctify even those who were marked by the sin and shame of Adam. And it began in those waters.

But others had come in the name of the Lord before claiming righteousness. Prophets had come before Jesus proclaiming God’s Justice and will for reconciliation. What made this day by the river in Galilee so special? It was a voice from heaven that said, " You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." God affirmed Christ the son. God announces to the world that Christ was sent to save, and as the angels proclaimed the birth of Christ to the shepherds, so do the people gathered at the river hear the good news of Christ’s mission for the world. God was present that day by the river. This is the true miracle of the story. In this act of baptism, God is present and God’s pleasure is proclaimed for the Son.

For Jesus, his Baptism was a beginning. It was a beginning of mission, a beginning of righteousness, and a beginning of revealing the presence of God. Does this sound familiar? As we consider the significance of Christ’s baptism, don’t these same things happen in our lives? As His baptism served as the beginning of Christ’s ministry, our baptisms do the same. As Luther said, we are a part of the “priesthood of all believers.” Each of us has a priestly responsibility to bear the word and celebrate the sacraments in our lives. This begins for us in baptism. For us it is also a fulfillment of righteousness. Luther called this righteousness an “Alien Righteousness”. No, it doesn’t come from outer space, but the righteousness we receive in Baptism comes from outside of us and our broken human condition. This righteousness

comes from Christ, and it aids us in putting to death the “Old Adam” or the sinful nature of ourselves. It’s a lifelong process and a daily struggle to wrestle with the “Old Adam”, because as the well-known Luther scholar and ACTS presenter, Dr. Timothy Wengert, said of Baptism, “The old Adam is drowned in the waters of baptism... but he’s a heck of an underwater swimmer!” We do not accomplish the defeat of sin by ourselves, but in baptism we are reminded that Christ has accomplished this victory for us. Lastly, while no voice from heaven may have sounded out on the day each of us were baptized, in those waters we are still named and claimed as the beloved children of God. God’s word was spoken over the waters as it was proclaimed through the assembly. Baptism, through God’s word, gives us a unity with one another and a holy bond with all the Saints who have gone before us. It is in these ways that the Baptism of Christ is significant for us as well.

The Baptism of Jesus was not an isolated event, in fact, as each of you were baptized, you were baptized into the life of Christ and rose to a new beginning. It is the common ground of the Christian faith and the one thing by which all Christians can orient our lives and witness. In baptism, we commit our lives to five points expressed in our Baptismal Covenant:

- To live among God’s faithful people
- To hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper
- To proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed
- To serve all people, following the example of Jesus
- And to strive for justice and peace in all the earth

It may be hard to memorize those points, so I propose we learn just three words, and help direct our baptismal calling in that way. Our Baptismal covenant expresses a need to be **Immersed, Renewed, and Flooding** for the sake of the world around us. Understanding this will help us to better share our faith and understand how our ministry finds its beginning in these holy waters.

To be **Immersed** follows the first point of the baptismal covenant, “to live among God’s faithful people”. Faith begins in the family, and baptism, at least in the Lutheran tradition, begins with those who bring the child to the waters. But in reality, it is a team effort by the whole congregation to raise one another up in faith. In this, we must commit to raising ourselves up in faith for the sake of our communities. This commitment to be with one another in community is the foundation of our baptismal commitment to one another and to God. God does not wish us to live in isolation, but in commitment to one another, we may be better practiced for times of serving the strangers in our world. Immersing ourselves faithfully in the lives of our congregation, our families, and our community is at its deepest level fully immersing one’s self in the waters of baptism. We are living out our baptismal covenant when we immerse ourselves in fellowship. This attitude will allow us to see fellowship as incarnational, or an expression of God’s presence with us, and allow us to better understand how God is present in the world and in one another.

To be **Renewed** follows the next two points of the baptismal covenant, “to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper, and to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.” Working to build community, share the good news, and face the ups and downs of life itself can be exhausting. However, a faithful grounding in the sacraments can provide much needed rest and renewal. Seeing the Sunday assembly, or whenever we gather for worship, as a means of renewal can be a refreshing and life-giving way to ground our lives in the abundant love of God. I believe that a study and hunger for the Word is the heart of this

renewal. The Word is OUR story. It should be engaging and challenging. Now this may seem like a trivial example, but I feel that devotion to the Word can be much like having a favorite television show or movie. If friends share a passionate love of a movie or show, perhaps they'll quote it to one another, or find ways that that show relates to life. Personally, my mind is always abuzz with quotes and quips, and I can't wait to share my favorite stories! Finding another fan, we'll share a laugh and make a connection over a funny scene from our beloved story. What if our story of faith was that engaging? This isn't to say scripture isn't engaging; rather too often we treat it as some distant, high, and unattainable narrative instead of finding the ways that it has been and is playing out in our lives. Luther worked diligently to craft a true translation of the Bible that was attainable to the German people. Unchaining the story of God's redeeming love and making it an intimate part of our lived experience is part of the rich history of Lutheranism. In this sense, living into our baptisms is about being so immersed in and renewed by a story that one quotes it, shares it, and connects over it.

Lastly, **Flooding** reflects the final two points of the baptismal covenant, "to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth." This is where the rubber hits the road for faith. Flood waters spread and consume all around them. Life after a flood is never the same. It's a difficult image, but as the prophet Amos says, "*Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*" Baptism is meant to change us, and our faith tells us this can change the world. To be a flooding church is not to be a destructive church. It's a calling to be renewers and agents of change. So often this can be a difficult task for congregations, particularly ones that are struggling to make ends meet. Too often churches think only of survival, and not about being a Flooding witness to the love of God. Author and Pastor James Harnish, compared this situation to his own experience of Congestive Heart Failure that almost killed him. Harnish says:

"I can assure you that when I was gasping for air with congestive heart failure, most of my energy was focused on the immediacy of survival! In the same way, one of the greatest dangers for any church suffering from [decline] is the natural tendency to focus on mere survival. When a congregation becomes aware that it is in or on the edge of decline, the primary question can easily become, "What can we do to help our church survive? How do we keep the doors open? How will we pay the bills?" But when survival becomes the primary motivation for change, the congregation will inevitably turn in on itself and become so centered in its survival needs that it will be ineffective in responding to the real needs of real people in the world around it. New people who come in contact with the congregation immediately sense that the church is not so much interested in using its resources to meet their need as it is interested in using them for its own survival. In the end, a focus on survival always becomes self-defeating. The process of dying and rising again, which is symbolized in our baptism, means letting go of our desire to do whatever we can do to simply survive."

Baptism can be the focus point for us to reconsider our way of congregational and personal life. We can orient ourselves around these waters, as Jesus did, and become Immersed, Renewed, and Flooding. All of this trusts that Christ is present with us, and it will be a necessary trust because living into our baptismal covenant can make us incredibly vulnerable. This vulnerability is holy, because we are following the path of ministry, righteousness, and favor laid out by God.

Let us make a commitment to God and one another today, that we will hear and internalize the covenant of Baptism to be the heartbeat of our individual and communal lives. Let us find the grace and strength that comes from living lives that are Immersed, Renewed, and Flooding. Amen.