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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/13/2008, The Baptism of Our Lord  
Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>2</sup>He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; <sup>3</sup>a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench... (Isaiah 42:2-3, NRS)

As I have grown older, and wearier in a way, I have learned to pull up a chair to the Communion rail when I hear Private Confessions. The church is quiet, and we are alone, the penitent and I. If it is late afternoon and a sunny day, we are permitted to see a beautiful ray of sunshine adorned by color as it passes through yon window. Only I suspect that the penitent seldom notices the ebb and flow of the light passing through our church windows, for the penitent has a troubled heart and is preoccupied with the sin he has come to confess, she has come to confess. This one kneeling at the rail, to use the images of Isaiah, is often a bruised reed or a dimly burning wick, and the pastor must be careful to not break him or to quench her spirit.

There is no need to rush through a Private Confession, and so I have learned to pull up my chair to the Communion rail. Luther believed that clergy would have plenty to do each week if they would simply make themselves available to hear Private Confessions. It is the most intense pastoral work of all, and needful. This sermon I stammer to preach now is directed to a whole congregation, with your great variety of hopes and dreams, fears and anxieties. And so the sermon ends up being a kind of *average* proclamation of the gospel, hoping to touch some corner of each of your souls with the word of grace. But Private Confession is much more personal. It is the close application of the Gospel to the individual person and to the concrete details of that person's life. It invites the pastor to listen with all his might, to sift through the stories of the Bible for relevant

passages, and then to speak the words that we pray will get a Christian life back on track. No need to hurry, I say. I just pull up a chair and settle down for an important conversation.

It is good work, and for all I know, the Holy Spirit is leading one of you or many of you to consider the ordained ministry for your own vocation. It is a good and Christ-like thing to hear confessions, and yet I am very mindful that the actual life of Christ is much more tender and much more patient than that of the pastor hearing a confession. The pastor has the great advantage that he or she is dealing with a *penitent*. The pastor is dealing with one who is troubled by sin, sorrowful for it, willing to confess it, and means to do better. But such was not our Lord's congregation. Our Lord dealt with the *world*, including people who counted themselves righteous, who were often indifferent to him and to his message, and in the end, a world who crucified him, with his only cry for them being, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."

It is easy enough to be gentle with the penitent. But what do we say about someone who is gentle as a way of life, with all comers, who if he treats them roughly at all (as when he overturned the moneychanger's tables and drove them from the temple) is treating them with the roughness of rescue, like plucking someone from a raging river even if bruising that one in the process? What do we say of Jesus who is simply relentlessly gentle?

This was the question for John the Baptist.

<sup>15</sup>But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us *in this way* to fulfill all righteousness.”

That phrase “to fulfill all righteousness” is one that I have used many times over the years, primarily in administrative matters. The Trustees, let’s say, incline toward a certain a decision. It’s not a big decision, just a little one, and we are eager to move on to other matters. But to be methodical, and “to fulfill all righteousness,” as I tend to put it, we put the matter in the form of a motion, vote on it, and record it in the minutes.

But in this Gospel Reading, emphasis should also be placed on the propositional phrase just before the notion of fulfilling all righteousness: “in *this way*,” “...it is proper for us *in this way* to fulfill all righteousness.”

What way is that? Well, it is a way that seems to entirely befuddle poor John the Baptist. It is the way of solidarity with a sinful humanity. Jesus is set to get his hands dirty. He is resolved to plunge himself into the muddy waters of the Jordan River *just like* that “brood of vipers” do who have been scared out of their wits by the preaching of John the Baptist.

“Repent ye,” John had thundered. And now, to his astonishment, Jesus is repenting. He is preparing to be baptized just like the sinners.

“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees,” John had warned:

Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.(Matthew 3:10, RSV)

And now, to his astonishment, Jesus is being baptized along with the rest of the sinners lest he too should be felled and thrown in the fire.

Only the matter is even worse that John knows. It is not that Jesus is being baptized *lest* he fall, but that Jesus is being baptized and

dipped unto the suffocating water *as a sign* that he will in fact be felled. He shall be felled like timber meant for the sawmill.

That is *his way*. His way of “fulfilling all righteousness” is this peculiar sympathy and love for a sinful humanity that he leads him to be cut down *as if he were a sinner* precisely that they might not be cut down! In the language of theology, the willingness of Jesus to be baptized alongside a sinful humanity is the commencing of his “propitiary sacrifice,” according to which he sacrifices himself that we might be spared the punishment our sins warranted.

Now, John the Baptist might have been befuddled by the determination of Jesus to be baptized, but I do not think Isaiah of old would have been. Isaiah had spoken of a mysterious Servant of the Lord whose way of life in this world is contrary to that of most powerful people:

<sup>2</sup>He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; <sup>3</sup>a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

Thus Isaiah anticipates the gentleness of Jesus. It is a strong gentleness — indeed, strong enough to conquer death — but it is gentleness quite different from the ax and fire of John the Baptist.

Christians are not to be a run-of-the-mill kind of people in this world. Rather, baptism is to see afoot on earth a peculiar people — a people who mirror the strong gentleness of Jesus.

It has always been that way that the children of Abraham were to be a distinctive sort of folk on earth:

<sup>2</sup>for thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations

that are upon the earth.(Deut. 14:2, KJV)

The New Testament simply picks up this call toward distinctiveness and applies it to Christians:

...our Saviour Jesus Christ; <sup>14</sup>Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.(Titus 2:13-14, KJV)

<sup>9</sup>But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light:(1 Peter 2:9, KJV)

Now, in the Baptism of our Lord, we see something of the details of our peculiarity: We see both our goal in life and our method for pursuing the goal. Our goal is to “fulfill all righteousness.” Our aim is to join the rest of humanity in fighting for the good here on earth. But our peculiar method in this good fight is the method of identity with the sinners. It is our way to plunge into the muddy Jordan along with the sinners we encounter in this world. We are not to think ourselves above them, nor to think them unworthy of our sacrifices on their behalf. With such a tender method we aim to not break the bruised reed nor to extinguish the dimly burning wick, and we aim to bring praise to the good name of the One we follow, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.