

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/10/2010, The Baptism of Our Lord
Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-22
The Affection of the Father

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

²³Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age...
(Luke 3:23a, RSV)

There was a time when thirty years of age seemed pretty old to me. I remember a Neil Young song called "Old Man" back when I was in college. He spoke of being twenty-four years old: "... twenty-four and there's so much more." And I remember thinking, "Twenty-four! That's years off." Well, those years have come and gone. Twenty-four no longer seems old to me. Neither does thirty. God willing, those are years of strength for our people and the joy of building a life.

Still, Jesus was not a child when he was baptized. Thirty years of age means that Jesus had already lived a major portion of life before he was baptized. Thirty years is a major portion of anyone's life, but in the case of Jesus, it was nearly the whole of it. Not a lot of time was left to this young man.

As I have pondered the story before us today, the Baptism of our Lord, I have found myself comparing it to the most beautiful Gospel story I know -- the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Only, this story rather goes in reverse of that one.

Because I am a father, my heart always goes out to the old man in the parable. I imagine his distress as his younger son readies himself to leave home. The father knows his boy. He knows that his son is not off on some noble mission. Truth be told, the father probably suspects that his son is up to no good, that he is preparing to live precisely the kind of life he in fact lives -- a wild, disorderly life that wends its way toward poverty:

¹³And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. (Luke 15:13, KJV)

So, imagine the farewell scene with the old man. The son is not slipping away from home secretly in the dead of night. It is not as if one day he is there, and the next day, poof, he is gone. No, the boy has been open with his intentions. He has asked for his inheritance. He has asked for it before his father has even died. The father has consented to the request, divided his living between his sons, and "not many days after" the younger son gathers all together and sets out on his journey to a far country.

Imagine those intervening days. I bet the father looked upon his son with sorrow and with fear for the boy. Already, a kind of loneliness troubles the heart

of the father. They sit at the supper table together and the father loves to look at the boy, trying to take in his son's image, for images and memories are all he is going to have once the son hits the road. I bet the father tries to reason with his son, and to persuade him to stay home, and failing that, to at least live a good life in the far country. He tries to impart whatever final wisdom he can. What life has taught him, he tries to share with his son, but he fears that his counsel is going in one ear and out the other.

Then the final scene comes. The boy has his breakfast, gives his folks a hug - even his righteous, older brother - and he is off. The old man can still see him for a good distance, since his son's travel is not a matter of hopping into a car and speeding away, but a slower thing. The older man watches his son as he walks on, watches his figure grow smaller and smaller until at last the failing eyesight of the father can no longer distinguish his son.

Then I imagine a poignant prayer. It is all that remains to the father, all he can do for his son. The father prays for his son: "God be with you, my son. God be with you strong!"

It is a good prayer, but a prayer borne along by sorrow and fear for his son.

Now let us slip back to the baptism of Jesus. In one respect, the situations of the Heavenly Father and the father of the Prodigal Son are similar: each father knows that his son is in for trouble. Both fathers can sense it. Both fathers can foresee it. Both fathers surely grieve over it.

But now we come to the great difference: While the father in the parable is not proud of the path his son is setting out upon, our heavenly Father in the baptism story lets out a cry of admiration of his Son:

...and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22, RSV)

What depth and complexity of emotion there must have been in this cry! "With thee I am well pleased," says the Father. But the unspoken completion of the cry must have gone something like this: "though this path upon which you are set is breaking my heart!"

Can you sense how important you are to your Maker? It was not just the Father who approved of the baptism of Jesus and the path that baptism launched him upon. So did the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit descended upon the Son in the form of a dove. All three of the Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity were united in this. They were of one Mind about the matter, and that matter is this: *you* are precious to them. *You* are worth contending for, even against terrible odds, even against sin, death, and the devil. Indeed, you are worth dying for if that is what it should take to give you a good life in these threescore and ten years and in eternity to come.

The Baptism of Jesus commences a fierce and massive battle for the soul of humanity. Our destiny was at stake in that battle, and Jesus seems to have known it. Later in this same Gospel, in the Twelfth Chapter of St. Luke, Jesus speaks of

being “constrained” till his ministry is accomplished. He speaks with the echoes of eternity. He speaks of the fate of the earth:

⁴⁹“I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! ⁵⁰I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! (Luke 12:49-50, RSV)

He has a will of iron. He is constrained, as if chains wrap him round and pull him along a particular path. It is a path that leads to Golgotha’s old rugged cross, and Jesus means to walk that path, because something big is at stake, someone precious is at stake: I mean *you*. The Baptism of our Lord tells the story of the start of the path that will lead Jesus to give his body and his blood for you, for me.

And how did He do? How did Jesus do after his baptism? Well, the *Prodigal Son* squandered his substance in riotous living. *This Son* also lost everything, but it was not in riotous living. Rather, he lost everything along the path of the greatest life of holiness this world has ever seen. Indeed, from the moment of his Baptism to his final death on the Cross, Jesus serves as the paradigm of what you and I should be seeking day by day: the dying of the old and the rising up of a new and righteous person to live before God.

Many of you will recognize the language of Luther here. In his *Small Catechism*, Luther poses the great spiritual question:

What does such baptizing with water signify?

This is a question that concerns many of us. You see our Baptismal Font here at the head of the aisle. You see the great Christ candle burning behind it. Some of you have been baptized here at Immanuel, some of you in other churches. But in any case, when you were baptized you were brought to Jesus and made his man, his woman. It is not for naught that the Christ Candle is right there at the font. You and I were meant to rise up from the water of Baptism right into the discipleship of Jesus. We were meant to rise from Baptism right into the path that Jesus walks, and that is always the path of love, self-giving, and purity.

And so, Luther gives his great answer to the question he has posed:

What does such baptizing with water signify?

Answer: It signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God’s presence.

In the coming liturgical seasons of Epiphany, Lent, and Holy Week, we are going to see Jesus do what you and I are now called to do. We are going to see

him resist temptation in the desert, call disciples and teach them, befriend outcasts and sinners, and ultimately die on the Cross rather than forsake humanity.

Two words of encouragement are on my mind as I reflect on the Baptism of Our Lord. One word concerns Jesus. The other concerns older Christians.

First off, I am glad that Jesus had some encouragement as he was setting out upon his public ministry. Any good path is a bit easier to walk if those who love you are on your side and are proud of you. If Jesus had surveyed sacred scripture, he could have come up with comforting texts of scripture, including this morning's beautiful reading from Isaiah:

¹But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:1-3, RSV)

Oh, how many times I have read this passage aloud for people in the hospital. They are facing some ordeal. Surgery awaits them. Therapy is going to exhaust them. I have been pleased to be able to remind them of the fundamental matter that as they pass through these waters and through these fires, the Lord, will be with them, and that he is their Savior.

But in this particular Gospel story, Jesus is blessed not only with memory of sacred scripture meant for all of God's people, but also with an address meant individually for him:

"Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

And the Spirit was with him too, in the form of a dove. He was surrounded by the other two Persons of the Holy Trinity. Surely that must have encouraged him as he set forth on the path before him.

It is akin to the individual encouragement you and I are about to receive in the Blessed Sacrament, when this same Jesus shall touch our hand or our mouth and say that he is on our side as we head out into the week ahead of us.

And let me end with a word of encouragement to older Christians. What I am thinking is this. When I was a young pastor, most baptisms were of infants. But nowadays, we are privileged to also do baptisms more along the lines of the baptism of Jesus. That is, nowadays, we are blessed also to do the baptisms of people who are twenty-four years old, or thirty years old, like Jesus, or even eighty years old or older.

There is no limit on that time in your life when you can either become Christ's man, Christ's woman, or return to that identity if you once started it, but then slipped away for a while.

The Bible raises no question about how Jesus lived his thirty years before his baptism. We know that he lived those years well, but that is not my point now. My point is that this is a new day, and it is a lovely day to begin coming to Christ, if you have not yet been baptized, or for renewing your walk with him if you have been baptized, but have strayed from your Savior.

“Twenty-four and there’s so much more,” sang Neil Young. But the truth is even better than that. It is more along the lines of “Threescore and ten years or even fourscore, and there’s so much more.” Indeed, even on our deathbed, we are able to sing, “...and there’s so much more!” thanks to the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.