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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/10/2016, The Baptism of Our Lord
Suffering All

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

This morning's Gospel Lesson records the first public step Jesus took as a grown-up on his journey that would lead him to the Cross and to our salvation. Jesus heard John preach and decided to be baptized by the man. Thus begins our salvation. So, my opening text tells the story of the Baptism of Our Lord. It comes from Luke 3 and goes this way:

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21-22, RSV)

For your sake and mine I am glad that Jesus took this step. In the long run, it meant much suffering for him, but it was a suffering he accepted for us, that we might have eternal life. We are *that* important to him.

You might heard many times the Affirmation of Baptism liturgy we use here at Immanuel. Glad to say, this morning we will witness that liturgy again as we receive Kari Swanson Riely into membership here at Immanuel. Each time we do this, I am struck by the power of the promises our new member is asked to make – especially that promise about “suffering all”:

P *[Name]*, do you intend to continue steadfast in the confession of the Church, and *suffer all* rather than fall away from it?

R **I do so intend, with the help of God.**

So it was with Jesus at his baptism. It was no casual deed he did then. It was the commencing of a path in which he committed himself to “suffer all” rather than to fall away from what was on his heart to accomplish. Like you and me, Jesus had one life to live, and suffering is hard. But John the Baptist had spoken of sin and repentance. He had used fierce imagery of axe and unquenchable fire. Jesus, looking on at John and listening to him, seems to have believed every word the man said, and concluded that humanity was in trouble. If John was right that the Kingdom of God was at hand, then Jesus believed that humanity was not ready. We were not ready to stand in the presence of a holy God. So, Jesus set out

to save us. He set out with the firm resolve to suffer all – temptation, rejection, abandonment, and finally the Cross. He resolved to suffer all rather than to fall away from the eternal help you and I need.

Our text says that after his baptism, Jesus “was praying.” I bet he was! I bet he was praying for strength to endure a path whose contours of suffering he might have sensed even at this early stage in his ministry. And it was upon this baptized and praying Jesus that the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and the voice of our heavenly Father could be heard, saying:

Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased. (Luke 3:22, RSV)

Thus there was divine agreement in this baptism and this path. All three persons of the Holy Trinity were in visible agreement on this path: God the Son was baptized and started his path. God the Holy Spirit descended on him and never left him during his journey to the Cross. And God the Father, with all the love that any father can have for a son, reassured his only begotten Son that he was pleased with him. It was a dramatic and holy moment in the history of humanity.

And it is a moment that makes a pastor glad, for it means good things for the people of the church.

For a pastor, one of the joys of serving for a long time in one congregation is that the pastor gets to grow old with the people. Think of Ann Siemer, for example. I’ve been pastor of this congregation for twenty-four years now. That means that when I came, Ann was a mere seventy-six years old. Now she is one hundred. I brought the Holy Communion to her earlier this week. She is as beautiful and faithful as always. She emphasized to me that she wants me to pass on her love to each of you. Being around Ann and so many of the elderly brothers and sisters of our congregation gives me a model of growing old gracefully. I do not know whether I can do that as well as they do, but I recognize the high spiritual privilege I have in being around such people for so long.

So for me, on this festival of the Baptism of Our Lord, I am grateful for the baptism of Jesus because it means that our elderly brothers and sisters of the church, who have for so very long placed their hopes and lives in his hands, will not be disappointed. The baptism of Jesus started a path that leads to the salvation of people like Ann Siemer.

Even more I am mindful of the passing of the years and the hope represented by the baptism of Jesus when I recall last Sunday’s baptism of little Maren Noelle McCafferty. It struck me for the first time, even as I was performing Maren’s baptism, that I am not likely to see her fully grow up. I’m too old. I mean, I’ve been privileged to perform the weddings of children I confirmed. I watched them grow up. I’ve been privileged to baptize the little ones of children I confirmed. I watched them grow up. Even so recent as, say, the baptism of Ephraim Bhasin, I simply assumed, without much thinking about it, that someday I would be able to teaching Confirmation to little Ephraim, and I looked forward to that with joy. But

last Sunday's baptism of Maren reminds me that time marches on. I am eager for the years of ministry ahead of me here at Immanuel, but to be realistic, I am not likely to enjoy seeing our littlest ones grow up and join me in studying the Catechism. Just not enough time left. But the great thing about the Baptism of Jesus is that you, me, and everyone can entrust those little ones to Jesus. He can take over when the rest of us fall. With his baptism, he started a path of love and integrity which won for him the right to take care of the little ones forever!

He "suffered all" rather than fall away from any of us here – old or middle-aged or young. No matter what fire and water we might have to pass through, the Baptism of Jesus started a path that won for him the right and power to see us safely through.

“FIRE AND WATER”

That phrase about “fire and water” comes from this morning's First Lesson, from Isaiah 43. My minister's manual pointed out this passage for me long ago, at the start of my ministry, and I have read this passage aloud for many people in the hospital room:

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.

When Jesus decided to be baptized, he accepted into his life the waters and the fire that would have overwhelmed you and me if he had not walked his particular baptismal path. Jesus rose up from the waters of the Jordan and was quickly launched into temptation, disappointment, and suffering. He persevered through it all. He walked his path with determination and courage. Later in St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus speaks of feeling constrained. He put the matter this way:

I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am
constrained until it is accomplished! (Luke 12:50, RSV)

Lots of folks have taken the solemn promises of baptism. Plenty of people have made good resolutions and have meant to fulfill them too. We all feel duty bound and constrained in various ways. But Jesus is distinguished by his total submission to his ministry and to the will of God. Not for a moment did he relax or fall away.

He is the perfect fulfillment of Isaiah's word of the Lord that promises to see us all the way through the waters and the fire. At his baptism he began the path that won him the right to say that in the end all will be well for us:

³For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:3, RSV)

So, we are still early in January of this new year. None of us knows the whole story of what lies ahead of us in this year of our Lord 2016. We must wait and see what this year brings for us as individuals and for our congregation, our friends, and our loved ones. We might go through some season of troubles this coming year that is so hard that it puts us in mind of the waters and the rivers of which the prophet speaks in Isaiah 43. Indeed things might become so intense that we are led to think of Isaiah's fire and flame. But Isaiah consoled his congregation by assuring them that they would make it through safe to the other side. He promised them that the waters would not overwhelm them and the flames would not consume them. It was as if Isaiah's mind and heart could sense ahead, across the centuries, to the Saviour. And I think that it is the true description of things: under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Isaiah foretold this quiet event we celebrate today, when a young man, maybe thirty years old, descends in the waters of the Jordan River, and there takes on the solemn pledge to see us through the waters and the flames, all the way through to salvation. And to this young man, Jesus of Nazareth, be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.