

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, January 10, 2021

Baptism of Our Lord

“WHO WE ARE”

One day, Mark tells us in his succinct manner, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. The moment Jesus came out of the water, He saw the heavens open, and the Holy spirit in the form of a dove descending on Him, and a voice from heaven said, “You are my beloved Son, you are my Delight.” (LB) This was a pivotal moment in Jesus’ life and, if we understand the meaning of baptism, should be a pivotal moment in ours.

BAPTISM TELLS US WHO WE ARE. That is why babies are baptized; every child born into the household of faith is a child of God.

Back in 1904, a ten-year-old named Virginia Cary Hudson wrote a series of essays for school. The essays reflect her clever take on the world, and especially on religious life in her small Southern town.

For instance, here are Virginia’s thoughts on the sacraments:

“Sacraments are what you do in church. What you do at home is something else. Cooking and sewing and running the ...sweeper, eating, sleeping, praying, and scrubbing yourself are not sacraments. When you are little, somebody carries you in church on a pillow, and you come out a child of God, and inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven. They pour water on your head, and that’s a sacrament.”

I like that! “When you are little, somebody carries you in church on a pillow, and you come out a child of God, and inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven...” That says it all doesn’t it? Baptism is sign and seal that we are children of God.

BAPTISM TELLS US WHO WE ARE. It establishes our rightful place in the universe. Whether we are baptized as infants or teenagers or adults, it is an announcement to the world that we are part of the family of Christ, who began His preaching and teaching ministry, first of all, by being baptized. Baptism is central to our lives. It establishes our identity in Christ.

BAPTISM ALSO TELLS US WE HAVE GOD'S SEAL OF APPROVAL. Notice what happened at Jesus's baptism. When He came out of the water, He saw the heavens open, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descending on Him, and a voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved Son, in Whom I am well-pleased."

When we are baptized, God puts His seal of approval on us. Let none of us call ourselves "worms of the dust" as religious people used to refer to themselves. Let none of us count ourselves as creatures of no import. Christ has died in our behalf. We are the redeemed of the Father.

On Louanne Johnson's first day teaching at inner-city Carlmont High School, a student threw a hard-cover dictionary at her head. To a former marine like Johnson, this was a challenge she was ready to face. Johnson knew the Carlmont kids were programmed for failure. She was about to try a massive re-programming on them.

Her first order of business was to let students know she expected the best from them. In her class she said, they all started out with an "A". Whether or not they kept that "A" was up to them. Johnson inspired students to achieve more than anyone thought possible for them. Under Johnson's guidance, many graduated and went on to successful jobs. The movie *Dangerous Minds* chronicles her success.

Well, here is the dangerous Gospel. On the day of our baptism, you receive an automatic "A". You did nothing to deserve it but it was granted just the same. That is what a sacrament is. It is a means of grace. What you did before with your life is inconsequential. What you have done with your life since, is between you and your Maker. But for that one moment in time, you were handed an "A".

It doesn't mean you are perfect. Far from it. ONE OF THE REASONS WATER IS USED IN THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM IS TO SYMBOLIZE THE WASHING AWAY OF OUR SINS. This wasn't necessary for Jesus but it certainly is for us.

There is a humorous story about Sam Houston, the hero of the Texas fight for independence, later president of the Republic of Texas, and then senator from Texas. Houston had been an up-and-coming politician in Tennessee. He was governor of Tennessee when his wife left him. Houston left his office in disgrace, and lived with the Indians for many years. The Indians called him the "Big Drunk".

But he finally made a new life in Texas, and married a very religious woman. When he was well into his sixties, he agreed to be baptized. They took him down to the creek, and the preacher reminded him that all his sins would be washed away, and he could be clean before God. Houston looked at the creek and said “Then I feel mighty sorry for the folks downstream who have to drink that water.”

Well, that could be said for a lot of people. Baptism doesn't say we are perfect. The bumper sticker may be offensive to many people, but that doesn't keep it from being true, “Christians are not perfect, just forgiven.” God has put His seal of approval upon us. We have received an “A” without deserving it, because of what Christ has done.

THE WATER SYMBOLIZES THE WASHING AWAY OF OUR SINS, BUT IT ALSO SIGNIFIES OUR NEW BIRTH INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD. We say of an expectant mother, “Her water broke.” Just as there is water present at our physical birth, so the baptismal water represents a new life, a new birth, God's Spirit comes upon us, and we begin living as citizens of God's Kingdom.

Baptism is a symbol that you and I have been born into the Kingdom of God—having done nothing to merit that status. Baptism is our citizenship paper. Our documents are in order, for we are joined with Christ. Baptism tells us who we are, that we have God's seal of approval on us, and we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. Nobody can touch us. We have been baptized!

One final word. The Civil War was one of the saddest times in our nation's history. When neighbors fought against neighbors, and brothers against brothers. Our nation became “a house divided”; it is only by the grace of God that our country survived the conflict as a united nation. There are many touching stories that have come out of our Civil War days, a temporary peace and civility in the midst of violence. One such story occurred in the winter of 1863. Winter had just settled over Virginia, and both sides had slowed their fighting considerably. In the Confederate camps there ministered a devout chaplain by the name of Willie Ragland.

Reverend Ragland preached the Gospel quite fervently, and a soldier named Goodwin was converted. Goodwin seized upon the idea of being baptized in the nearby Rapidan River, which was the dividing line between Confederate and Union troops in that area. Confederate officers tried to discourage the idea,

knowing that any man who approached the river was sure to be picked off by Union snipers. But Goodwin was determined to be baptized into his newfound faith, so officers finally agreed.

Reverend Ragland, Goodwin, and about fifty Confederate soldiers left their weapons behind, and made their way cautiously down to the river. Union soldiers, perplexed by these unarmed men wading out into icy waters, held their fire. Then, the Confederate soldiers began to sing, "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emanuel's veins; And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains."

Some Union soldiers, moved by the sight, left their weapons too, and, lining up along the opposite side of riverbank, joined their voices in singing. "And since, by faith, I saw the stream. Thy flowing wounds supply. Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be 'til I die."

One little moment in an awful war. It would not be long before both sides were once again fighting and killing each other. But there was that one astounding moment when both sides gathered to honor the work of the Lord. A writer, J. M. Beadles, recounting the details of this story in a 1917 magazine article wrote, "Both armies were at peace, as they witnessed the death of the old man, into resurrection of the new man through Jesus Christ our Lord."

What a miracle. All that from a little water. But behind that water, stands the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN!

"S.D.G"