

## **Belonging**

**Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, Acts. 8:14-17**

**January 11, 2004**

In October I had the rare privilege of baptizing our grandson James. What an exciting and at the same time daunting experience! Our son and his wife belong to a very large Presbyterian Church in Nashville. It was exciting, and reassuring, to hear all those people promise to love and nurture my grandson. To my surprise, the pastor turned specifically to the children sitting up front and asked them. "Do you promise to love and help these babies." They gave their assent with happy eager voices.

But it was also daunting. It's one thing for me to stand here before you. After all, I know you, and you're a small, friendly group. But to be before a strange congregation that is 10 to 20 times bigger than we are is another story. Fortunately, two dainty little girls were being baptized along with my strapping grandson. You can believe that I watched carefully how the pastor held those two babies, how he splashed the water, how he said the words. I worried about a lot of things as Chris handed James over. Would I remember the words? would James cry? I even heard mom's words to me on a similar occasion: "Don't you drop that baby!" But once he was in my arms, once my fingers felt the water, I forgot all that and was awed by the significance of the moment. "James Robb Karcher, I baptize you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Then I took water again and made the sign of the cross on his forehead, and said, "You are marked as Christ's own forever." Everyone was smiling as I walked down the aisle--everyone except James. James, with his big blue eye staring into mine, was very solemn--most as if he understood. Of course he didn't.

As he grows he will begin to understand. But for him, as for us, the full meaning of our baptism takes a lifetime to fathom. Someone has said that, when we think of baptism we think of the event--the moment in time--the point at which the water is applied and the words are spoken. But he goes on to say, this reference in time, is only the tip of the iceberg.

This morning I want us to look beneath the surface of the water and think about three of the central meanings of our baptism--meanings that are there from the beginning, but that we need to live with, to grow into, if we are really going to understand them.

**First, we receive the Spirit. Think about the moment after Jesus baptism. Luke writes that the heavens opened. Think of it! The heavens opened. And what came down?**

**Chariots? A host of angels? No, a gentle dove floated down. That's the way it was for most of us at our baptism, I imagine. The spirit can come in the rush of a mighty wind and like a tongue of fire, but for most of us the spirit came quietly and gently like a dove. And the spirit remains with us, not like the flashes of a lightning storm, but like the quiet rain that makes the seed open and grow. Whether we recognize it, whether we notice it, the spirit is at work in our lives.**

**Second in Baptism we are named. Names are important. We all know how good it feels when someone remembers our names. Think how the exiles in Babylon, who surely felt lost and weak and forgotten, felt when they heard Isaiah's word. "... thus says the Lord who created you, , who formed you, Fear not, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name." New parents think long and hard about what to name their child. Little James is named for three of his great-grandfathers. . In biblical times, names had great significance--they carried with them and revealed the essential character of a person. The cartoon characters Li'l Abner and Daisy Mae noticed that their young son was stealing from people, so they changed his name to Honest Abe, and he stopped stealing! Now notice what the Holy Spirit says to Jesus, what name the spirit gives to Jesus after his baptism. "You are my Son, the Beloved." The Beloved. What a name! God says something similar to the exiles in Babylon; you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. But the exciting thing is that, our baptism means that Christ has redeemed us, and we have become joint heirs with him, So we know that we, too, are loved, we know that God calls us his children, his beloved.**

**Yes, we are named. And this can hardly be separated from the third meaning of baptism: We belong.**

**The inspiring preacher Fred Craddock tells about a man who came over to his table one day in a restaurant. The man had a story to tell. He was illegitimate. He never knew his father. And he grew up in a small town where everyone knew this about him and no one would let him forget it. It was an embarrassment and a burden and it embittered him and made his young life a misery. Because of it he never went to church--he was sure he would not be welcomed. But a new preacher came to town, and everyone**

raved about what a good preacher he was, and boy was curious. So one Sunday he went in and sat on the back row. After the service he tried to slip out, but the new preacher grabbed him by the shoulder and asked him "Who is your father, boy?" There was an awkward pause and then the preacher said. "Why, you're the son of the Living God. I see the family resemblance." That one sentence transformed the boy's life. He no longer saw himself as illegitimate, he had a Father, he belonged--he belonged to God. As the man got up and left Craddock's table the waiter asked, You know who that is? That man was a three-term governor of the state of Tennessee.

What God said to Jesus, "You are my Son."--what God said to the exiles: You are mine." God says to us in our baptism. I said it to my grandson: You are marked as Christ's own, forever."

We belong. And being named and belonging lead inevitably to the third meaning: we are baptized into community. We are responsible to each other and to passing on the joyful truth of God's love. That's why Jesus came in the first place. That's why Peter and John were sent to Samaria. That's why we promise, every time a child is baptized, that we will nurture him or her. That's why the preacher grabbed the boy by the shoulder, turned him around and told him he was the Son of God--told him he belonged.

Yes, friends, baptism is a once in a life time, once of all sacrament. But, as someone has written, we never outlive or outgrow the day when we need to recall with thanksgiving God's self giving to us in baptism and to see it continuing daily in our lives. When Martin Luther got up in the morning and put water on his face, he would say, "I am baptized!" It was a way of reminding himself that living out his baptism was a key to discipleship. Our baptism is permanent, but renewal of it is a lifelong process.

Let us pray:

Creating God, let me  
Dive deep  
into the fount of my baptism  
Deep into the emerald blue pool  
of your bottomless grace  
Ad your voice,  
mysterious as stars

on eternity's edge,  
whispered before I ever was...  
Caressing me, bathing me  
at my beithing, in living water...  
"You are mine: I love you."

Sustaining God, let me  
Dive deep  
so when the storms of life  
Sweep across my stillness  
Swirl my confidence  
Muddy my vision...  
In the midst of such confusion  
I will still hear clearly  
the calling whisper in my heart...  
"You are mine, I love you!"

Tom Lane