

**Baptism of Christ Sunday/January 12, 2014**

**Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17;**

**Rev. Joel M. Krueger**

You know, it was a strange Christmas this year. With having to cancel church worship the two Sundays before, and not getting to go out caroling, and not having a Christmas tree in our house and maybe just being in a new and different house, and having to move the kid's Christmas pageant to Christmas Eve (although I must say there was something good about that), it just didn't seem like Christmas, at least not for me.

Don't get me wrong, the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service was beautiful and the kids did a great, a wonderful, job with the pageant, and I was moved, again, as always by the lighting of the candles and the singing of Silent Night, and just seeing all those gathered here together that night . . . to remember, to think about and acknowledge the "*wondrous gift given.*"

But as Kate said to me earlier this week, the best part about Christmas this year was the baptism. Yes, we were gifted with the opportunity to celebrate Christmas with the baptism of a tiny, well, really not-so-tiny infant boy named Maddox Peter Morrill, Briana & Matt Morrill's 8-month old son, Roger & Beth's grandson and Betty's great-grandson. We gathered here with about another dozen of you from the congregation at 8:00 a.m. on Christmas morning and we shared together, witnessed together, this ancient ritual, this sacrament of baptism. And it was beautiful.

And while Christmas is not about the baptism of Jesus but about his birth, it just seemed especially fitting to have an infant child in the front of the sanctuary on Christmas day.

The rest of that day was pretty mundane. We had to spend some time in the office before we went home and then had to pack and get ready for our vacation. We drove for 6 hours to Kate's mom's house in Connecticut and by the time we got there were exhausted. So much for Christmas day. But it *was* Christmas. And the celebration of the sacrament of baptism did bring special meaning to it this year for both of us.

Now today, we, along with much of the church universal, are called to celebrate and remember the *baptism* of Jesus. We have the record of this event from all four gospels, including Matthew's gospel which we heard today. I am intrigued by the part of this story, where John the Baptist, recognizes who and what Jesus is, as Jesus appears before him. That he, Jesus, is none other than the promised and long awaited Messiah of the Israelite people, and so John says to him, "*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*"

Jesus' response to John is, "*Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.*" Jesus does not come to John as a heavenly being, a mighty king, as someone high above him or as an all-powerful, supreme leader. He comes to John, as a *servant*, humble and meek and in need of his service. As one in need of a calling, an ordination, a ritual, a sacrament, of that something that will open him up, open his heart, to the Spirit of God, that will lead him forward, push him, test him, try him, and prove him, forming him into the One with whom God is well pleased. The "*Beloved.*"

Yes, Jesus comes as a servant. And no less a servant than that spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. "*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.*" Matthew, like Isaiah, speaks often of righteousness, the kind of righteousness that reaches out to the poor, to the outcasts of society, to the marginalized, the ostracized, to the meek and humble, to the powerless. And lifts them up.

Today, we have an opportunity to remember the baptism of Jesus. To understand its meaning for him and for us. But we would be grievously mistaken if we did not also take this opportunity to remember our own baptisms as well.

Martin Luther, the great German reformer of the sixteenth century, would often tell his congregants, "*Remember your baptism.*" He said, "*A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued.*" During the time he struggled through the lonely months while kept hidden for safe keeping from his enemies in the Wartburg castle, he would battle his despair and depression by writing on his desktop, "*I am baptized!*" It was a reminder of who and whose he was, that he was indeed a "*beloved*" of God, and that he had a calling to fulfill.

Today, we are invited to remember our baptism. To remember it as a sacrament. Recall the classic definition of sacrament: "*An outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible grace.*"

For Christians, this is our entrance ritual. It is a public display along with promises spoken, vows taken before others, that speak of our commitment, our giving ourselves over to the Spirit of God, to the way of Christ, whether we consented to it as adults and knew what the words meant or whether we were baptized as infants or young children, with our parents making that commitment for us, guiding us, teaching us along with pastors and church teachers what those words meant, what the water poured upon us was about, until we could know and confirm it for ourselves. And even for those of us who have not been baptized, the invitation, the welcome and love of God to be known as a "*beloved*" is just as certainly true.

Remembering our baptism is not so much remembering the water poured, or even the words that we promised, as important as those are, that outward, visible sign. Rather, it is to seek to know the inward, invisible grace, to know what things God is doing inside of you, to know what stirrings, what motivations God is kindling inside of you, what kind of passion for service God is calling you to do, to know what kind of *servant* God is calling you to be.

In Kate's hymn that she wrote for today, the second verse begins, "*The blessing poured upon his skin, the chosen one surrenders, to deep compassion stirred within, his life to God is rendered.*" That's powerful! But what you don't know is that when I first read it, she had one different word in there. Instead of "*The blessing poured upon his skin*" she had "*The blessing seared upon his skin.*" That really caught my attention.

She told me she changed it because "*poured*" speaks more of the water baptism given him by John. But for me, "*seared*" speaks more powerfully of the essence of his baptism, a baptism in the Spirit that would burn hot inside him, leading him out into the wilderness to be tried and tempted. And John himself said that while he, John, baptized with water, this Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire!

I believe we need to think about what our baptism means. Has it been *seared* upon our skin? Has it been *seared* upon our hearts? Do we know that inward, invisible grace that this sacrament is stirring within us? As we look toward a new year, what will 2014 hold for us? For this church? Does our baptism really hold any meaning for us? Does it make any difference? Do we truly know ourselves and one another as "*beloved*?" Do we see ourselves as called to service? Are we prepared to be servants for God?

Indeed, may we know and respond to the stirrings inside us, that inward, invisible grace that calls us to be servants, just as Jesus himself was a servant to God's love and justice and mercy and compassion. Amen.