

Baptism of Our Lord  
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, Ph.D.

Saturday, January 9, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29;  
Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ.

After tucking in his six-year-old son Christopher into bed one night, his father tapped his son on the chest and said, "Do you know what you have in there?" Chris said, "Lungs?" "No" said his father, "you have a piece of God tucked in there." After a very puzzled silence, Christopher said, "You mean God is in my lungs?" "No, no" said his father, "we have a piece of God inside us. It is the Holy Spirit. God has given it to each of us as a gift to each of us, and it was given to us when we were baptized." Chris smiled and tapped his Dad's chest and said, "You have a piece of God in there?" His father, said "Yes." Christopher laughed and said, "Does my Mom have a piece of God in there?" His father said, "Yes." "Does my big brother Matt have a piece of God in there?" and his father said, "Yes."

Now Chris's father knew about the class that Christopher was in at school. He knew that in that classroom at school there was a girl, named Mary, and Mary was a piece of work. She made everybody's life in the classroom miserable. Man, she could be mean and nasty. Then Chris's father said to him, "Do you know Christopher, that there is even a piece of God in Mary?" Christopher's face looked absolutely amazed. "No! Not Mary!" His father said, "Yes, there was a piece of God in Mary." "Daddy, I have been around Mary much longer than you have ever been. She doesn't have a piece of God." His father said to him, "Oh yes she does. God never misses anyone." Chris thought about that for a while and then he looked at his father and said, "Well, all I can say is that her piece of God must be covered up with junk!"

The junk, if you will, that covered Israel, that covered God's spirit in Israel, was what had arisen to them in their society. The ways of God had been swallowed up by the politics of the time. Sounds a little familiar, doesn't it? The ways of God were swallowed up by the religious practices of the time and the end result was that the religious authorities and the government were in a league with Rome. God became sort of a ceremonial figure and worship just ended up being sort of an empty ritual.

It was in the midst of all of that confusion that John the Baptist appeared, calling the people back to the way of God and faithful living. He said the problem was that they had forgotten the ways of God and that was what had gotten them into all the trouble. Hmm! Have we forgotten God's ways? Could it be that the troubles we face with war, terrorism, finances, employment and all the other crises, could it be that despite how loudly we say it, could it just possibly be that we have forgotten about the ways of God?

John offered the people of Israel a new beginning. New beginnings are sort of tricky sort of things. People get quite scared about new beginnings. You know a couple of

weeks ago, I thought to be retired was fantastic. I wouldn't have to do anything! I could lay on the couch and I could watch reruns of my favorite TV movies, I could eat snacks, I could drink sodas, and I could have a wonderful time, and then Mrs. Hardy would come home and she would make supper and everything would be great! I was thinking that was quite good, but do you know what? Would you believe that I am starting to get a bit scared because I won't know who I am, or what to do come Monday, after next Sunday, because I will be retired? I won't be Stew Hardy, the Senior Pastor of Trinity Church. I'll just be Stew Hardy. Hmm. That is sort of a scary beginning.

For you it is the same. Pastor Ludwig looked really nice today. Wonder what he is going to look like on the Monday when Stewart Hardy is not here? But you see—that is what God is about all the time. He is about new beginnings and so John came to the people of Israel, offering them a new beginning. The way it was to be done, was in baptism. The water of baptism was to wash off the voice of the past and set things straight for a new beginning. He offered the people, in this baptism, a completely new life with God and he would adopt them, or the baptism would adopt them, as children of God. We are in our baptism washed clean and adopted as children of God. The junk that keeps us from God is taken away and the junk that keeps us from one another is taken away. The junk that makes us afraid of new beginnings is washed away. Of course the problems of John coming meant there were some difficulties for the church as well. Now there was John, and then there was Jesus, and who was who, and who should follow what? The problem was how to distinguish between them. How to make sure you were following the right one and the gospel writer, is at pains to ease everyone's confusion.

In the text he has John speak these wonderfully humble words in order to set the record straight. First, John says, I am not fit to take off Jesus' sandals. Now at the time the lowest slave in the household, took off the sandals of the guests and took off the sandals of his master. So that after coming inside, the feet could be washed. Do you remember those big jugs of water that Jesus turned into wine? Those were the jugs that we used to wash feet before people went inside. John said that he was not even worthy to be the lowest of the slaves who washed the guests' feet and took their shoes off.

John also said that his baptism was only water and all it did was talk about people wanting to clean their lives up and change it. Something like washing before you go to the dinner table. In contrast, John said, Jesus' baptism is "with the Holy Spirit and with fire." That notion of fire is much more powerful, than water. It talks about using fire to clean something, not only on the outside the way water does, but on the inside, the way we do when we are finding, say gold. The gold is heated on the crucible and the imperfections and the things that would reduce its value, float to the top, where there they can be skimmed off, so the refiner's fire purifies the gold.

Then the gospel writer talks about Jesus being something like God's winnowing fork. A winnowing fork was a very important piece of farm tool in Jesus' time. It was used to throw up sheaves of grain into the air, so the air currents could blow the chaff to one side, and the heavy grain would drop right down onto the threshing

floor. Once that had been done, the threshing fork was used to clean up the chaff, and then to gather up the grain that was going to be stored after the harvest. So, the gospel writer talks about this baptism. A baptism that cleanses and refines and puts us aside as valued grain gathered up and stored for God. The gospel talks about what happens as a result of our baptism. You see, once we are baptized we are drawn into an inescapable relationship with God and Christ. All that is left to complete the baptism is how we respond. What we do with it once we have got it. How we live out, and out of our baptism. That response is evident, not in the fact that we are sitting in church on Sunday, but it is evident in what we will be doing and saying tomorrow, the next day, and all through the week, and until next Sunday.

Our baptism is shown in the way we live, and act, and have our being. It is, if you will, evident in everything that we do. Just so it happened to George Morrison, who was the pastor of a great big congregation in Glasgow, and he was famous because of his preaching. He told one time of a dream that he had. That he had died and went to heaven. In his dream, there he was at those gates of heaven, talking to St. Peter. "Who are you?" said St. Peter. "I am Morrison," said Morrison. "Who?" said St. Peter. "George Morrison, the preacher." "No record of you here." "That cannot be," Morrison said. "For twenty-five years, I served a huge congregation. Every Sunday morning I preached twice. People tell me that I am a fantastic preacher, and some people have changed their lives because of what I've said." Saint Peter looked through his papers again, and said, "Sorry, none of that here. What did you say your name was?" "George Herbert Morrison." "Oh," said St. Peter, "what do you know? I have a little note here that says that one night George Herbert Morrison sat up all night with someone who was dying."

The real issue you see isn't whether or not we are baptized and it really isn't whether or not we are in church, the real issue is what are we doing with our baptism? The closing verses of this morning's gospel show us Jesus' unique and unmistakable identity. It is the unique and unmistakable identity, believe it or not, that each of you has been given through God's grace. The climax of Jesus' identification does not occur when Jesus comes out of the water, or even when John is pouring water over his head, or dunking him in the river three times. It takes place after the fact when Jesus is praying. Did you notice that? It is while Jesus is in prayer, that the Holy Spirit comes down upon him, and God announces that he is his beloved son.

We need to remember that when we are reading this gospel, because in the most revealing and powerful moments in Jesus' ministry, you will find that they occur in this gospel, every time he is at prayer. It is during this time of prayer that Jesus receives the Holy Spirit, and begins his ministry. It is just as true for us. "Stew Hardy, why are you so afraid about the new beginning I have laid before you. When you are afraid, speak to me, pray, and the way will be made clear to you. Trinity, Contemporary Worship people, why are you anxious about a new interim pastor? He is here to do my will and to lead you forward. Speak to me, trust me, pray to me, and I will show you all a marvelous new beginning, and the way forward." So to for each of you. You have been marked in your baptism. It happened when the

pastor marks the cross on your forehead with oil, and mentions your name and says, "Child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ, forever." Identity bestowed and the Spirit given. All that remains is for us to live out our identity as children of God, and allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, with us, and through us in faithful living.

Maybe, just maybe, it can all be summed up in a story by William Bausch about George Washington Carver. In 1921 Carver was summoned to Washington, D.C. to appear before the House Ways and Means Committee to explain his research on the peanut and its medicinal and commercial potential. Carver waited all day for his turn. He was the only African American in the room, and was last on a long list of speakers. All day he squirmed in his seat because he felt the hostility of the people in the room toward him. He felt by turns uneasy and terrified. At last his turn came and he was called forward. He rose and began the long walk down to the podium. As he walked down the aisle, he was met with derisive and bigoted comments. One of the committee members yelled out a crude and cutting remark. It hurt Carver deeply, but he ignored the remark, and continued to walk down the aisle. Another committee member leaned back in his chair, placed his feet up on the table, and put his hat over his face as if to go to sleep.

When the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee instructed the member to take off his hat, get his feet off his desk, and pay attention, the man responded with a loud and ugly racial slur. At that point, Carver was ready to give up, to turn around, and to go home. He was afraid of the powerful men in the room, of their hostility and the hatred that they openly showed him. All he wanted to do was to run out of there to safety. But he didn't! Instead he reminded himself of his baptism, and who he was. Whatever they say of me, he said to himself, I know who I am. I am a child of God, and I belong to Him. By his baptism he knew who he was and to whom he belonged, and what he was about. He finally got to the podium and spoke for twenty minutes. He opened his display case and started to speak. So engaging was his presentation that those minutes just flew by. The Chairman rose and asked for an extension of time, and not one person on the committee objected.

Carter was granted four additional extensions of time and, in the end, he spoke for hours to an audience that was sitting on the edge of its seat and in George Washington hand. At the conclusion of his presentation, the members of the Committee to a man, gave George Washington Carver, scientist and former slave, a great standing ovation. What gave Carver his courage that day? The knowledge that he had been baptized. You see, by our baptism, we know who we are and to whom we belong. We are not just anybody out there. We are the children of God. We are His, and He walks with us. He opens the future to us, and makes new life and new beginnings possible for us. Baptism, you see, while it cleanses our sins, it is far more. It represents our identification with Christ. Remember Christopher, the little bit of God in us. Baptism is our initiation into the Body of Christ.

So Beloved, let us both, Stew Hardy and all of you, go forth, secure in the knowledge that we have been baptized. We are not our own. We belong to God.

Therefore, let us go forward together into new beginnings, confident with the knowledge that God walks with us. So let it be.  
Amen.

Copyright © 2010, J. Stewart Hardy. All rights reserved.