

## ***The Precious Are Prepared***

The Baptism of Our Lord  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, January 10, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's been a curious contrast: The intentional way we at Trinity have been preparing for our senior pastor's pending retirement... and the abrupt goodbye between the congregation to which my mother belongs in northwestern Pennsylvania and **its** pastor. In the midst of **this** helpful transition you and I are experiencing ahead of Pastor Hardy's retirement, I have listened to my mother as she voices grief, anger, and even a sense of abandonment in her congregation.

My mother's congregation is small. Its most recent pastor was there 13 years. That's a long time, allowing for the building of strong, deep relationships. My mom's pastor certainly built those relationships. He was respected and loved for his ministry. He nurtured that congregation with his preaching, Bible studies, and compassionate care. My mom was especially grateful to him for the time two years ago when he stayed with my homebound father for hours—and I mean *hours*. Mom took suddenly and seriously ill, and was scheduled for complicated emergency surgery. I was making arrangements down here to travel up there to be with my father while my mother was under the surgeon's knife. Her pastor took care of my blind and frail father for hours till I could get there.

But he left the parish six months ago. And abruptly. Well, there were the usual couple of weeks of closure following the announcement of his resignation, but it was not enough time all the way around. There was a final Sunday, a final sermon, a final coffee hour, but by then parishioners were upset, and the pastor was emotionally distanced. Rumor had it that it all came to a head over money. (Money's a big factor in divorce; I suppose money is a big factor in pastoral changes.) Mom thinks there had been conflict and power struggles all along with Council over money, and that the last straw was when the pastor asked for funding to provide a bit of carpet for the basement Sunday School room, so that the floor wasn't so cold for little children to sit on it. The council said no. The pastor started looking for a new parish. But I'm sure there were two sides to this story. There usually are. The point is he left rather abruptly, and the congregation was reeling over it. Down here in Camp Hill, we've been waxing nostalgic, celebrating Pastor Hardy's ministry with us, planning special events for his final weekend. Up there the people have been feeling abandoned. The contrast could not be greater.

The feeling of abandonment reaches down into the core of a person's being. Like an empty stomach that cannot be filled, or a thirst that cannot be slaked, when one feels abandoned, there is such a sense of helplessness. Maybe some of us here have not experienced that feeling, but I tell you, **Israel** was experiencing it. Today's first lesson brings a message to Israel at its most beleaguered moment. Israel's continual disobedience and faithlessness had brought God's judgment upon the nation—the

people suffered deportation to foreign lands, Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed. So now the people are in exile in Babylon, and it seems as if Babylon's god is oh-so-much greater than Israel's God, who doesn't appear to be great, or even present at all. No future in sight, no hope in their hearts--Israel believes it has been abandoned.

But Isaiah here in this passage, as the Lord God's mouthpiece, makes bold promises. These promises begin with a reminder that the Lord God created this people, and now, says Isaiah, God is present to redeem them:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When 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...  
you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you...*

No, Israel had not been abandoned. God loves the people he has made; they are precious to him. He will save them and bring them home. But such saving is not without cost, and in the midst of these glorious promises we hear the truth of that cost. Isaiah proclaims the Lord God will give other nations as ransom for Israel. Nations with wealth and resources far above what Israel possesses will be exchanged for the life of poor, bedraggled Israel. Apparently, redemption isn't carried out with a snap of the fingers or a twitch of the nose, like Samantha in "Bewitched." Apparently, redemption of human creation exacts a price. Don't let that fact be lost in the midst of the promises.

You and I who look to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior can see now how **our** redemption came at a cost. Our disobedience and faithlessness will not be covered and overcome by a snap of the fingers or twitch of the nose. The Lord God will pay any price to bring us into a full relationship with him. So he chooses to give himself ... in human flesh ... on the cross ... as exchange for our lives. The perfect, obedient One as ransom for you and me and all humanity—poor, bedraggled people that we are. Redemption of human creation exacts a price. Don't let that fact be lost.

But neither forget the promises. God does not, will not abandon the people he created. We remain precious in his sight, and loved by him. And the event of Jesus Christ come to us, dying for us, and sending his Spirit to us seals these promises made. "Nancy Lynn, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." Isn't that what we boldly proclaim at every baptism in this place? That we are God's, forever?

And how many times has Stewart Hardy declared those words in this place for our sake? My youngest child, Rebecca, was baptized here at Trinity in 1997, with Pastor Hardy officiating. My favorite way to remember that day is to look at one particular photograph: Stewart holding Rebecca in his arms, my husband Randy and I and our oldest daughter Sarah smiling for the camera, and my son Matthew (at 3 ½ years of age) doing this—(Note to readers: Matthew had his fingers spreading wide the corners of his mouth and was sticking his tongue out for the photographer!) Apparently the Holy Spirit hadn't quite arrived on the scene at **his** baptism—well, no, just joking—I trust the Spirit was given to him. For Matthew, too, has been marked

by that cross and claimed by God. But look what happened to the Samaritans baptized in Jesus' name in our second lesson. The Book of Acts details the rather unpredictable ways people came to faith in the early Church. Some people were baptized and received the Holy Spirit right then and there—something that we Lutherans hold in our baptismal understanding. Others received the Holy Spirit, and then it was thought wise to go and be baptized. Still others, such as the Samaritans in our passage today, were baptized, and only later did the apostles come to lay hands on them and pray for the Holy Spirit to fill them. Seems to me that you and I and Matthew and Pastor Hardy don't have all that much control over the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It means that, instead, we must trust in those promises God has made to pour that Spirit out on us when we most need it. We must view our Baptism as the start of our journey, not the end. And we must have faith that the God who formed us and redeems us also journeys along with us.

Before Pastor Hardy retires, I've been plumbing the depths of his accumulated wisdom for my own pastoral ministry. On Christmas Eve afternoon I asked Stew a series of questions, one of which was "What has sustained you in your ministry, especially through difficult times?" I'm not breaking confidentiality here when I tell you that Pastor Hardy told me, "Prayer. Prayer sustained me." I should not have been surprised. For when we pray, we are placing deep trust in the God who promises to journey with us. Some days we may doubt that presence and even feel abandoned, but I would encourage you with Pastor Hardy's encouraging words to me: Prayer. Prayer sustains. Prayer sustains us until the wave of feeling of abandonment subsides, and glimpses of God's ever-present love are seen once more. And you know that Holy Spirit that God promises us? That Holy Spirit will **help** us pray those times we swear we cannot voice a single petition on our own.

I've been thinking a lot about my mother, the fellow members of her church, and their pastor who left. Perhaps his leaving **was** abrupt. Perhaps a good and healthy closure should have been attempted by all parties. But I hope—and I believe—that, in time, my mom and her congregation will look back at those 13 years of that pastor's ministry among them and realize with gratitude that all along he was, in his words and deeds, proclaiming God's love for them, letting them know they were precious in God's sight. This pastor was, in fact, preparing them for doing God's kingdom work in the world, with and without this particular pastor. Do you understand what I mean? He wasn't called to be the only one in that place doing ministry, doing it **for them**. He was called to prepare **them** to do ministry in their daily lives. Not just get them to come to church, but to go out in to the world and serve in Jesus' name.

Look, Peter and John go on over to Samaria, lay hands on the baptized and pray for the Holy Spirit, and I tell you, those people in Samaria following Christ were ready to serve, ready to give witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ. A good thing, because Peter and John themselves would be needed in other places.

For over 20 years, Stewart Hardy has, in his words and deeds, proclaimed God's love for you and me, letting us know we are precious in God's sight, and that God has the power to transform us for real life. That was his calling as our senior pastor. All along, Pastor Hardy has been preparing us for doing God's kingdom work in the world, with—and without—Pastor Hardy. You can trust that your other pastoral leaders—

John Brock, Guy Edmiston, Nancy Easton, our Vicar (Tom Holdcraft), and our interim senior pastor Glenn Ludwig—will make those same bold promises of God’s love and presence and power to you. For that is our calling as well.

So be it known that for over 20 years, Stewart Hardy has been preparing you to do ministry, to follow Christ in your daily lives. You are indeed precious. You have been prepared. And you are ready. **AMEN.**