

## **Baptism of Our Lord**

January 11, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Psalm 2: 7-8; Matthew 3

*Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

She was running oh so late. She hadn't even gotten to change from the grungie clothes she had worked in all day. They were her old painting clothes with blotches of paint from various projects and a few tears from nails that had snagged her. There was dried dirt on her knees from when the dog knocked her off balance when she tried to untangle him from his lead yet one more time. What a day for the clock's battery to die. And no matter how hard she had hinted that she had to go, her cousin just couldn't stop fuming on the phone about all the family dramas and faux pas' during the holidays. Now she was a half hour late getting to the homeless shelter to help her church serve supper.

In her rush she had grabbed her husband's ratty coat (that he would not let her toss) which only had an old knit hat and mismatched gloves in the pockets. Well, she couldn't worry how it looked. It was too cold to go without and she was late. She hated being late. She hated that folks might think she wasn't coming. She was a woman who could be counted on. And she felt strongly about supporting the homeless shelter. No one should have to sleep on the street. But she was late.

When she pulled up they had already opened the doors to check people in. There was a large huddle of people waiting to get inside. As she approached the group, she politely said "excuse me" and tried moving closer to the door. But all she got were some icy stares and grunts. More loudly, she said, "Excuse me. I need to get in." Someone answered, "So do I".... another, "So do we all, lady."

"No, really," she said, "I'm suppose to be working in the kitchen with the church people. I'm late." "Uh-huh." A few snickers. "No really," she said again. One of the shelter patrons helping with crowd control came over to see what the fuss was about. "I need to get in now. I'm suppose to be helping serve dinner. No one will let me through." He looked at her — the oversized ripped coat, mismatched gloves, her dirty pants and sneakers with a few holes in the toes ----- and said, "Good try, lady, but everyone has to wait their turn." It finally struck her, she was being mistaken for one of the homeless. She thought she might laugh. It was so absurd. Quietly she touched the man's arm and said, "I know how this may look, but I'm not one of them." The man's face went blank. Several who had overheard, turned to stare at her. She did not feel she was in any danger but she was starting to get really annoyed " I'm telling the truth,"she said, "this is getting ridiculous." And then it just slipped out, "I'm not one of you!" Suddenly there was a deep silence as her

words echoed in her own ears. She felt her face getting red with shame. Someone yelled from the door, “Hey, Sally, get in here. It’s about time you showed up.”

Maybe it was just an extension of her anxiousness at being late. Maybe it was simple exasperation at not being able to get where she needed to go. But what she said was “How could you ever mistaken ME for one of THEM?”--- one of those “weak people whose bad decisions had derailed their lives,”<sup>1</sup> or in theological terms, “I’m not like one of these sinners!” It wasn’t that she disliked such people. She always signed up to come to the shelter when her church did. She had helped collect blankets, warm hats and gloves for the homeless. It was just that she never expected to be mistaken for one of them. She saw herself in a different category and thought anyone could see that.

“The opposite kind of thing happened the day that Jesus showed up at the Jordan to be baptized by John.”<sup>2</sup> There were crowds of people drawn to the Baptizer’s call to repent of sin. Whether that meant the wrongs of individuals or the wrongs of the nation Israel, many came to confess and be cleansed in the river. Many came believing, rightfully as it would turn out, that John was announcing that God was about to do something new for Israel, for the world and they needed to make room by giving up faithless choices and careless faith lives. The place was teeming with self-identified sinners ---- faulty, sorry, guilty human beings — who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around.”<sup>3</sup> There were people you might expect — those whose names show up in the arrest records in the newspaper — and those whose sins were not so apparent. In any case, they all knew they were not clean, they were not sinless.

“Then Jesus showed up and got in line with them. No one knew anything about him yet. His public ministry begins with his baptism, so the crowd did not part when he appeared. He simply took his place in line and waited his turn, but later, after the heavens were torn apart and the voice from heaven made clear who he was,” many would wonder what he was doing in a crowd of sinners. “What did he have to be sorry about, and why was God’s Beloved submitting himself to a scruffy character like John?”<sup>4</sup> Jesus was identifying himself, not with God the righteous judge, but with the people who are themselves facing that judgement and needing to repent.”<sup>5</sup> This is the Son of God? Being baptized like he was a sinner?

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way, “If Jesus had listened to his public relations people, he would have been more like [Sally] wanted to be ---- a friend to sinners, a kind and loving helper, but never mistaken for one of them. His handlers would never, ever have allowed him to be baptized. He could have stood on shore and offered words of encouragement to those going into the water, yes. He could held out his hand to those

who struggled out of the river in their heavy wet clothes, yes, but he could not under any circumstances have gone into the water himself, unless it was to tap John on the shoulder and say, 'Hey, you go rest. I'll take over for a while.' Even if he were innocent, even if his intentions were nothing but good, it was ruinous to his reputation. Who was going to believe that he was there just because he cared about [the least, the lost and the last] and refused to be separate himself from them?"<sup>6</sup> Is that any way for the Son of God to act?

Thanks be to God, yes it is. Jesus did not worry about guilt by association. "In him, God's being-with-us included God's being in the river with us, in the flesh with us, in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of new life with us."<sup>7</sup>

Emmanuel ---- God with us — came to save us by "humbly identifying himself with God's people," walking with us into the depths of our sin and the struggles of repentance, showing us how to live faithfully and free for God and others and ultimately dying our death so we might know God is even more powerful than the worst we do or dread.<sup>8</sup> It may not seem like a wise or convincing way for God-in-flesh to act but that didn't stop Jesus from coming to the river to be baptized with sinners like us. It may get him in trouble to associate with the shady or shameful but that doesn't stop Jesus from coming to be with sinners like us, as we confess, as we receive his body and blood, as we try day in and day out to live in a manner that gives glory to the Lord who was not too embarrassed or ashamed to become one of us.

Remember your baptism today and each day. Whether you were brought in your mother's arms or came on your own steam... whether the water was sprinkled, poured or surrounded you... Remember Jesus was with you as you traveled through the river of life to a new, eternal life with Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Remember, in Christ you are one with all flawed human beings and in Christ you are God's beloved in whom God takes delight. And wherever you are go, what ever comes — at your best or your worst — Jesus walks with you. And if you allow him, if you trust him, Jesus will lead you to live more fully, more freely and with world-changing purpose. Remember your baptism. Remember who you are ----you are the way Jesus now comes up to walk beside sinners like us, so they too may know they are God's beloved. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 1/10/15

## ENDNOTES

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1. Barbara Brown Taylor, "The River of Life" Home By Another Way Cambridge, MA: Crowley Publications, 1999 p.33

2. Taylor, p. 33

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3. Taylor, p. 33

4. Taylor 34

5. Adapted from Tom Wright, Matthew for Everyone, Part One Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, p 21

6. Taylor pp 34-35

7. Taylor, p. 35

8. Adapted from Wright, pp 21-22