

Baptism of our Lord
Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry
Year A: Mt 3:13-17

King of Glory Lutheran Church
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Just Surrender!

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Bishop Meghan of the Rocky Mountain Synod told the story of her first son’s baptism. She and Gabi, her husband, waited to have him baptized until the time and place felt right. When they were back in Galilee where Gabi is from, it was time.

Of course it was Meghan’s first-born child. And as a pastor, she knew what to expect from a baptism in America – in an ELCA congregation. Parents hold the baby, they answer questions as to their own faithfulness in bringing up the child, some water is sprinkled on a baby’s head. But now, in Israel, in an Orthodox Christian church, Bishop had no idea what might happen.

The women of the extended family are called ‘aunties’. Meghan and Gabi arrived at the church, with the baby’s baptismal gown all pressed and ready to go. Suddenly, surrounded by all these aunties chattering in Arabic, the baby was taken from her arms and that was the last she got to hold him until the service was over. To say she was shocked would be an understatement.

When the time came for the baptism to happen, Meghan and Gabi watched as their son was handed from person to person up front. Then he disappeared from sight within the group on the altar. They heard the priest’s words and heard the sound of the water. When he came up out of the water, he was naked as a blue jay and dripping wet due to being immersed. Now, his name is being withheld as a way to protect the innocent who is a teenager today and doesn’t really like his mom telling this story. But I’ve met him and he’s a fabulous young man!

Up out of the water he was lifted, lathered in fresh, clean oil and his new baptismal gown was put on him. Meghan hardly understood a word that was spoken. Yet she understood this. Her son was a new creation in Christ.

Reflecting on it later she recalls, ‘as shocked and even upset as I was that I couldn’t hold my own baby, from a theological standpoint it made perfect sense. I couldn’t control what happened if I had wanted to. It was out of my hands. I had to surrender him to the love of the community that held him and loved him and prepared him through this washing for the rest of his life. As his mother there would be many things I wouldn’t be able to protect him from. I would have to trust others in his life to hold him, love him and prepare him for. Gabi and I were only two people in the community God had placed him into. For that I was deeply grateful.’

As ELCA Lutherans, parents choose to have their children receive the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Or adults choose to come to this watery font themselves. They pick the day when extended family can be present to make promises to the baptized. Pictures are taken and we feel like everything is our choice. But is it?

When Jesus came up out of the water the Holy Spirit descended upon him as a dove. A voice came from heaven, ‘This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

What if Baptism isn’t an act of choice, but rather an act of spiritual target practice?ⁱ Yes, spiritual target practice! The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus. He didn’t have any choice in the matter. The dove zoned in on Him, landed upon Him and in that moment Jesus was declared beloved!

Jesus knew He’d been targeted. He could only submit to the Spirit and God’s words. There wasn’t any choice, only surrender. Only surrender to the truth that He is God’s beloved Son.

Rev. Anna Carter Florence writes, “How might our lives be different if we saw our baptism as an act of surrender rather than choice? How might we look at one another if we saw the inevitability of our being loved by God?”

Don’t raise your hands, but answer in your heart. Do you know that being loved by God is inevitable for you? For me? It’s inevitable. God loves. That’s what God does!

In our everyday parlance, we're used to hearing the word surrender in the context of aggression or war. The opposing army finally surrendered. The football team surrendered to their loss.

But here, surrender isn't a negative thing. Rather it's perfect. Oh yes, we still get drawn into the false idea that God chooses to love us or not. But it's not true! God's love is unconditional. That dove was an outward sign of an invisible grace...love. It lighted upon Jesus without Him choosing it. 'We are loved by God, through no act of our own. It is in our nature to be sought after, to be spiritual target practice over and over and over again!'

In the very next verses, Jesus will enter the wilderness. This is the place where real choice begins...temptation to believe He is Not a beloved child of God. That's a temptation for us all.

There will be much that tempts us in life. Tempts us to believe that we'll be in charge or have control. We still are typically under that illusion as young adults, but by adulthood, the illusion vanishes like the morning mist. We're not in control of much!

Tax rates. Grocery prices. Illness. Accidents. Death. The other political party's choices. What other people think about us. What other people say behind our backs. We can't control when we get the 'good one' from the boss, or when our friend will forgive us.

It's amazing isn't it, that we still tempted to believe we can control life?
Tempted to think that we have power over what cannot be controlled?

The best way to walk, people of God, is with our feet wet, surrendered not to what we cannot control, but to God's love and will for our lives. Remember when we used to get out of the pool on a hot summer day? Shivering we would run to our get our towels warmed by the sun. But looking back, we could always see our footprints on the cement? We walked wet, until we surrendered to the warm towel wrapping us up.

Walking wet means we can get up in the morning and go to bed at night remembering who we are and whose we are. "God loves me. Period. End of story." Sure we need to ask forgiveness. But to rest assured of God's love like a warm blanket wrapping us up morning and night.

Walking wet means every day we trust God will lead us and guide us to do and say what God needs us to do and say. We let go of any need to control or give advice. Taking direction from the One who is Love and wants that Love to be shared.

Walking wet means we surrender to God's love as a gift; to be opened day after day after day. In Baptism, there is no choice. It is an ongoing reality...God's acceptance and forgiveness to be received day after day after day. It isn't a one-time event. And that grace is not our choice. It is a gift.

Walking wet finally means that there is a community that surrounds us: family, friends, congregation members. Life is too challenging to try to do it on our own. We need to surrender to the help, the love, the encouragement of others. That is not what we earn, it is only a gift to receive. Bishop Meghan and Gabi's son was passed around from auntie to auntie, a visible sign of God's people who would surround him all his days. What a beautiful thing to surrender to.

Surrender to being spiritual target practice...to being loved, period. Perhaps if you need to imagine it, see yourself falling backwards into a swimming pool of God's love and grace. Yes? Yes!
Amen.

¹ Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence. Luther Seminary. St. Paul. MN. 2016. Pg 23-24.