

Sine Domino Frustra Laboramus

Festival of Epiphany / Baptism of our Lord
January 10, 2010
Glendale Lutheran Church

RAGING RIVERS

Isaiah 43:1-7

I.

It is almost always a delightful dilemma when there is more than one emphasis for our Sunday morning worship, reflected by the uniqueness of our liturgy. First of all, the Festival of Epiphany, which was just last Wednesday, January 6, the “12th day after Christmas”). It is right, proper, imperative and invigorating that we pay homage to the Christ-child, as did the Maji of old, offering costly gifts to the King of kings, bowing down in reverent worship and adoration. This whole season of Epiphany is about God’s revelation of himself not just as man but as the Lord of all! If Christmas tells the story of God becoming flesh and blood through a baby named Jesus, then this season tells many stories that this flesh-and-blood man is also God!

II.

This chapter of Isaiah was filled with baptismal imagery, including Verse 2: *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, and the flame shall not consume you.”*

Before Jesus was baptized, John set the stage by saying of Jesus, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit

and with fire.” You see, that Lord didn’t then nor does he now pay attention to any religious externals; he goes right into the heart, seeing faith or unfaith, discipleship or empty rhetoric. And there will be separation and eternal division and judgment, with which we are never comfortable.

And then there is that matter of passing through the waters, and knowing the presence of God; and when the rivers rage, when life is filled with tumult or turmoil, when you feel in over your head, we have the promise that we shall not be overwhelmed. And those raging rivers don’t have to be only internal or personal. A senseless tragedy like ABB affects us all. Add to that the would-be suicide bomber landing in Detroit (who pleaded ‘not guilty’ yesterday). That we live in such a world with the value of human life so minimized by even a few could be overwhelming, were it not for the truth that God’s kingdom still reigns supreme and is eternal, and when you study Scripture through the eyes of faith, you know that truth not to be an empty platitude but a powerful promise.

Baptismal imagery, indeed. The first and last verses of this reading are absolutely classic: *But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed your, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” – Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.*”

Ah, the intimacy and intricacy of God’s creation called male and female. The sheep simplicity and beauty of it all. I have used James Weldon Johnson’s sermon more than once, and until I come up with something better, I’ll continue to use it again and again. Here is how this Negro preacher in 1919 described the miracle and mystery of making man: *Then God walked around, and God looked around on all that he had made. He looked at his sun, and he looked at his moon, and he looked at his little*

stars; He looked at his world with all its living things, and God said, "I'm lonely still. Then God sat down – on the side of a hill where he could think; by a deep, wide river he sat down; with his head in his hands, God thought and thought, Till he thought: I'll make me a man! Up from the bed of the river God scooped the clay; and by the bank of the river he kneeled him down; And there was the great God Almighty, who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky, Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night, who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand; This great God, like a mammy bending over her baby, kneeled down in the dust, toiling over a lump of clay till he shaped it in his own image. Then into it he blew the breath of life, and man became a living soul."

He who formed us, who created us, who made us, calls us by name, each of us. He who gave us life in the first place – through water and the power of his promise – has given us new life, spiritual life, life born of the Spirit, life as a child of God. I can think of no better place to have our beautiful baptismal banner hung than as we enter the front door, reminding us weekly of God's precious, reassuring words to us, "I have called you by name; you are mine!" We like it when a person remembers our name, but that's not always so. God does not forget a name, any name, nor does he forget any birthday, or any baptismal birthday. They are not in his heavenly 'palm pilot,' but in the palm of his hand. It is still another way of showing us how much he loves us, how special we are to him, how one-of-a-kind we are in the eyes of God. A chapter earlier in Isaiah, the prophet echoes this theme again, "I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you."

Imagine that – we are in God's hands. So often that is the final word, the ultimate expression, by persons who are faced with an assortment of

decisions or situations. When a person has confronted cancer for months or even years, and everything humanly possible has been done to eradicate that deadly disease to no avail, we know full well that the length of that person's days on this earth is in God's hands. When a daughter or son leaves the proverbial nest to study at a university or to serve in the armed forces or to do a mission trip overseas, our parental apprehensions are tempered by believing that our child is in God's hands. In life or death situations, we are in God's hands. Through potentially life-changing decisions we must make, we know that the decision is in God's hands.

To be in God's hands is to believe that God is infinitely bigger than we are, and stronger, and wonderfully wiser. To be in God's hands evokes imagines: of intimacy, of tenderness, of security. God loves us and so has extended his hand to us whenever we are faint-hearted or fearful. Remember when the risen Lord appeared to Thomas and the other fear-filled disciples, "You want to know how much I love you? See the nailprint in my hands – these are hands of victory, of life, of peace, of presence, of power, of resurrection." "I have called you by name; you are mine!" To be a child of God is never in the past tense; it is always in the present and future tense. Our epistle reading says it so powerfully, "We were buried with Christ by baptism into death so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too may walk in newness of life." That walk is a daily walk; the remembrance of our baptism is a daily remembrance; the renewal of the covenant between us and our God is a daily renewal. To be a child of God carries with it enormous privilege and just as enormous responsibility: to grow in and through the Word; to worship the Lord of the Church faithfully and joyfully; to offer first-fruits of time and treasure in grateful response to God's love; to serve the needs of people, humbly and happily.

A splash of water is sufficient for the Spirit to declare that we are forgiven and freed to be a child of God and an heir of his kingdom. But there is also need for nourishment, for food and drink, bread and wine, to declare still again that Christ's body and blood were broken and shed on Calvary's cross to pay the full price of our sins and to provide for us the promise of eternal salvation.

We need the humbling and heartening reminder to remember our baptismal covenants, day by precious day of life, to receive in faith the Lord's words to us, "I have called you by name; you are mine!"

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.