

BY WATER AND THE SPIRIT

Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

January 11, 2009

(THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD)

**Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens
and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth
and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the Lord,
I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness...**

My big brother ... well, my older brother I guess I should say ... knows a little something about that.

Because, after all, the Lord called him. I don't know why. He just did. He's like that. God calls the strangest people, sometimes... And he didn't just call him, mind you. He sent him somewhere. Gave him to some people over in Lincoln County. At the Trinity United Methodist Church in Hamlin, mind you. They didn't ask for him, really. They just got him. God does that to Methodists. They tell the bishop what kind of preacher they need, and God sends my brother. So he does know a little something about being called and sent.

But there's more. There's more. Isaiah said the Lord's servant is called and sent ... to bring out the prisoners. To set them free. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has sent me" Well, you know what it says. And my brother knows all about *that*, too. He had to set a prisoner free right there in Lincoln County. On a Sunday morning. Right there in front of God and everyone else in the church. And the sad thing is the prisoner behind bars was his son. My nephew. Who was four, maybe five at the time. Sounds awfully young, I know. But there he was behind bars. And it all happened because of a children's

sermon. Delivered, of course, by the child's father. My brother, Kenny.

He stepped down from the pulpit that morning, took his place there on the chancel steps, and asked all the children to join him. And they came. All of the children slid out of the pews and slid in beside him. And he reached into his pocket, took out a tube of toothpaste, and started his sermon. The children's sermon, I mean. "I brought some toothpaste with me this morning," he said. And one of the kid's said, "Are you going to brush your teeth, preacher? My mom makes me brush my teeth *before* I come to church."

Well, he went on. "How do you get the toothpaste out of the tube?" And all the kids said, "Squeeze it! Squeeze it!" So ... he did. And out came the toothpaste into his hand. Which is what he meant to do, I think. But he didn't mean to squeeze it so hard. So there he was ... sitting in church, surrounded by children, with a handful (nearly) of blue sparkly toothpaste, and a whole church full of people watching him. And he told the kids that words are like that. They're like toothpaste. Because once it's out

there you can't put it back into the tube. And when you say something about somebody else, you can't grab the words and shove them back into your mouth. (Wouldn't it be great if you could?)

Well, he thanked all the little ones and led them in a prayer. And while he was praying, there was a bit of commotion there ... to his right. And when he opened his eyes he saw it. Everyone saw it. Eric, his son, was behind bars. He was behind the chancel rail, mind you. And his head was sticking out between the "bars" of the altar rail. And the bars were close together. Really close together. And Eric was stuck. He tried to pull his head back through them, but he couldn't. He was stuck. He turned his head this way and that. Even sucked in his cheeks to make his face narrower. But it didn't help. It just made him look like a big fish. A church fish, I guess.

Well, Kenny, my brother, wanted to help him. But he still had a hand full of toothpaste. And nothing to wipe it off with. And he kept looking back and forth -- from his little boy to his hand with the blue sparkly toothpaste. And there was nowhere to put it. So ... he licked it off. And

swallowed. Which nearly gagged him, I think. And then he tried to pull Eric's head from the altar rail turned prison bars. And other people came and tried to help him. But the poor kid was stuck there.

I told somebody about this once. And they said, "Well, what did they do?" So I told them. "Somebody went across the street to the Pentecostal Church and told *their* preacher about it. And he came right away, anointed the kid, and his head slipped right out."

My brother didn't seem to appreciate that. But anyway ... they did manage to free Eric's head from the altar rail. (Without any power tools or sharp instruments, mind you.) And it turns out the whole thing was for the good. Because attendance went up after that. People just didn't want to take the chance of missing out on something spectacular like that happening again.

And they tell me that the folks there in Hamlin keep a little flask of anointing oil there in the pulpit just in case

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It reminds me of something that happened years ago when I was a pastoral intern at the Aldersgate church in Durham. It was Easter Sunday, a beautiful day. And the church was adorned with lilies and candles. And all the banners for all the seasons and the sacraments were up that Sunday, so that the church was just bursting with color. A wonderful contrast from Good Friday when the altar was stripped and bare and the sanctuary was somber and dark. And to top it all off, we were having a

baptism that Sunday. A baby boy. All dressed in white, a sign of new life and victory in Christ our Lord.

And the service began with the organ fanfare. And the choir came in singing, “The strife is o’er, the battle done. The victory of life is won. The song of triumph has begun. Alleluia. And then the whole church sang, Charles Wesley’s great Easter hymn, “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today.” And it was perfect. It was everything church should be on Easter.

And Bob, the pastor, greeted everyone. And I read the scriptures and the choir sang. And then the young parents brought their baby forward to be baptized. To be named and claimed as one of God’s own. And it was perfect. The baby was just looking around, happy as could be. And Bob led them through the service of Holy Baptism. And then he said, “What name is given to this child?” And they said, “John Mark.” And Bob turned toward the font, and he stretched out his hand to scoop up the water and baptize the child. But something was missing. The font was empty. It wasn’t just empty it was dry! Dry as a bone!

Somebody forgot to pour water in the thing before the service began. Can you imagine? What kind of person forgets to fill up the font for a baptism? On Easter Sunday? Well... that’s not important. You don’t need to hear that. But what you need to hear is that Bob, the pastor, didn’t miss a beat. He went up to the altar with the baby in his arms. And he stood there for a moment, and bowed his head. And then he turned and came back to the font. And on the way back, he walked right by the pulpit, grabbed the glass of water the ushers put there for him every Sunday, crooked his elbow so that the sleeve of his robe slid down over his hand and the glass, and dumped it out in the baptismal font. And John Mark was baptized. Marked as God’s own on Easter Sunday.

And I don’t know about anyone else, but the Hallelujah chorus never sounded so good to me as it did that morning.

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Well, Something like that happened to Paul the Apostle. He was on his way back to Ephesus, says Luke. And somewhere along the way he found some disciples there. Not some of the Twelve, mind you. But just some people who wanted to follow Jesus. And Luke -- the writer of Acts, mind you -- doesn't say a whole lot about it, really. But when you read what he *did* say about these folks, you get the feeling something was missing. Something that should have been filled was empty. Dry. As a bone... So he started asking them questions. "Tell me, when you became believers, did you happen to receive the Holy Spirit?" And they looked at him and said, "What's a Holy Spirit? We didn't even know there was a Holy Spirit."

Empty. Dry. Something in them that should have been filled wasn't. It just wasn't there.

So Paul said, "Well... how were you baptized?" And their answer said it all. "We were baptized the way John baptized people." John the Baptist, that is. The same way all those people were who came down to the Jordan, before Jesus, they said. People who came to the river for a makeover, you could call it. People who wanted a change, a fresh start, a new life. It was kind of like a New Year's resolution with water. And the water was to show God and everybody else that they, meant it. They really meant it.

And Paul said, "Oh... I see. Well, that explains it." And he told them that John the Baptist came preaching, calling people to repent and turn around. To get ready for the One who was coming after him, mind you. And Paul told them about Jesus -- the One who would baptize them not just with water, mind you, but with the Holy Spirit. The water of life that would spring up inside them and fill them with God -- with the Spirit and the presence and the strength of God. And when they heard that, says Luke,

they were baptized in the name of Jesus. And the heavens tore open and the Spirit descended and they said things they'd never been able to say before. And they preached and they prayed and they sang to the Lord.

And there were twelve of them, says Luke. Just about enough to start a church, I'd say. Enough to serve, and enough to give, and enough to tell others about this same Jesus who comes to us and dwells in us and does his work through us.

And baptism tells us that we are God's children. That we are God's own. For just as the heavens tore open and the spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism, and just as the Voice said this is my Son, my Beloved... the heavens tore open at your baptism, too. And the Spirit of God has come to you and dwells within you. And God looks at you and God looks at me and says, "This is my Son, my daughter ... This is my child, my own beloved one.

And today we remember that. We remember our baptism. Because the truth is we don't always feel like God's children. We don't always look like his children. And God knows ... God knows we don't always act like it

either. But that is who we are. Not because he chose us. Not because we deserve it. Not because of anything we said or did. But simply because God loves us. God loves you. And God chose you to dwell in and love and through you to love others.

And sometimes -- I don't know about you -- but sometimes it's awfully hard for me to remember that. I have spiritual amnesia. I forget sometimes who I am, whose I am. And I try to do things on my own -- without God, mind you. And without God -- again, I don't know about you -- but without God, I make a real mess of things. But there is something I've learned to do. And that is to remember that I am baptized.

Martin Luther did that. Martin Luther the Reformer. Because he had the same problem. He would try to do things his way. Without God, mind you. And so he learned to do something that helped. He would touch his forehead and say to himself, "I am baptized. I am baptized." And it reminded him that he had been named and claimed as God's own. That the Spirit of God lived within him. And that having been born of water and the

Spirit, he was a new creation in Christ. And by remembering his baptism, Martin Luther was able to stand against the storm and be the servant and the leader God called him to be.

I think it helps. That's why we remember not just Jesus' baptism today, but our own. So that we might remember who we are and be the people and the church together God calls us to be.

There is a story about a little girl that helps me remember... She was visiting her grandfather one day. Spent the whole day with him. And they had a wonderful time. They had tea together. And they played games. And her grandfather told her some wonderful stories about things that happened when he was a boy – just about the same age as she was.

And in the afternoon they went for a walk round her grandfather's orchard. And on the way back to her grandfather's house, they stopped by the well. It was an old well, with a little stone wall all around it. And her grandfather took a bucket and lowered it into the well to draw out some water. And out of the blue, the little girl

looked up at him and said, "Grandpa, where does God live?"

And he said, "Let me show you." And he sat the bucket down by the well. And he lifted her up to the edge of the little stone wall and said, "Look, down there and you'll see." And the child peered down into the well to see where God lived. But all she could see was her reflection in the water. "Grandpa," she said, "I don't see God. All I can see is me. It's just me." And her grandfather who was filled with wisdom and grace said, "And that's exactly where he lives. God lives in you."

Today, when you come to remember your baptism, look into this well ... into this water ... and let it tell you again that God lives in you. That you are his own beloved son or his daughter. And that the Spirit of God dwells in you.

I do not always feel like a child of God.

I do not always look like a child of God.

God knows I do not always act like a child of God!

But I am.

I am one of God's children

**not because of what I did or because of who I am
but because God chose me,
out of all the universe,
to be his child.**

I am God's own.

**When I am anxious or alone or defeated,
baptism ought to speak a firm word
of comfort to me:**

"Take heart, be calm.

You did not choose me ...

I chose you.

Remember who you are.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, OblSB

