

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota

Matthew 3:13-17
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
 January 12, 2014

KIDS' MESSAGE – (Gospel Text from Spark Story Bible.)

ADULT MESSAGE - (Inspired by Dr. David Lose, Working Preacher notes.)

He was the **happiest person in the church**. Last Sunday my wife Jennifer and I, on vacation, worshiped in a Brainerd area church. We've been there before when on vacation. We sat toward the front in a sanctuary that was quite empty due to the extreme cold. I noticed a little Down's syndrome boy tentatively come up for the Kids' Message. He didn't seem to want to leave his parents who were in the back ushering. But he finally made it, half way through, and sat with the rest of the kids.

Later in the service, after the sermon, it was time for the offering to be received. As that young usher family came forward to get the offering plates from the pastor, the little Down's boy raced up with them and darted ahead to be able to at least touch the plate before his parents began to pass them pew by pew. When the offering had finally been received, this little boy and his older brother, without their parents, carried the plates forward to present to the pastor for placing on the altar. Being close to the front, I was able to see the boy's face. I don't know if I have ever seen a more wonderful look of pride and joy than that little boy wore from ear to ear. Right then and there I decided that he must be the happiest person in the church.

There was a lot of Godly happiness the day that Jesus was baptized by John in the river Jordan. We may think about baptism as being a time when our sins are washed away and we are made right with God. But Jesus had no sin. That's why John was reluctant to baptize Jesus. Why was Jesus baptized? Our answer comes in the heaven-opening words that God speaks when Jesus rises up from the baptismal waters. "**This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.**"

In this declaration, God

- **Announces God's favor** in Jesus,
- **Establishes Jesus' identity** as God's Son,

- **Commissions** Jesus as God's presence in this world,
- **Inaugurates** Jesus' Mission to save the world,
- **Assures that God is present** in all that Jesus does.

So, that's why Jesus was baptized. Why do we baptize our little ones? It is usually a very big day for the families. Relatives sometimes come from long distances to participate. Some families faithfully take out and light the baptismal candle each year on the anniversary of the baptism, like a birthday party. These are all nice. But what's the big deal?

Baptism is bigger than one day or one event. Through our baptism into Jesus Christ, **we too receive**

- Our **identity** as children of God, sisters and brothers of Jesus,
- God's good and gracious **acceptance and affirmation**,
- God's **promise of daily presence and help** in our lives,
- God's **empowering grace to live boldly** as **beloved children of God**, with whom God is **well-pleased**.

Why were there so many red cars for sale by beautiful ladies for weeks before Christmas? Our commercial culture has somehow convinced us that our personal worth/value is determined by us by having a shiny, new car... by us being rich enough, strong enough, skinny enough, successful enough, popular enough, beautiful enough... The world says that our worth and acceptance is somehow related to how much we have or to how much we can do...

In baptism, God, who created and sustains everything in this world, tells us that **we are enough**, that we are **accepted just as we are**, and that **God desires to do wonderful things** for us and through us. Don't sell baptism short! God, not the salesman, not the neighbor, not the employer, not the co-worker, not the snob at school – God says

- I made you.
- You are mine.
- I love you with all my heart.
- I will bless you.
- I will never let you go.
- When you die, I will bring you home to live with me forever.

God says these things to you through baptism. God promises these things to you in your baptism. God keeps God's promises forever.

That's true for the little Down's syndrome boy who was so proud to bring the people's offerings forward to give to God. It is also true for the little boy in that same service who apparently has some form of autism. He came forward for the Kids' Message okay. But then he spent the rest of the service standing between his mom's legs, looking her square in the face, while the pastor preached and the service concluded. Others times when I've been there, that little boy has shouted and squirmed during the service. Last Sunday morning, did the love of God embrace that little guy through the assurance of his mom's loving presence with him? Were all the rest of the people in that service tolerable for him because he could be confident in his mom's faithful presence? What does God's faithful presence, gifted to us in baptism; do for you and the quality of your life? When, in your own life, you start to squirm, or are so distressed that you just want to cry out, is God there for you?

Did God look down from heaven, see those two little boys and say, "**These are my children, beloved to me, and I am well pleased with them?**"

Did God's Holy Spirit, received by each child of God at Baptism, move mightily in that place?

- In the young pastor who preached,
- In the more experienced pastor who led the liturgy,
- In the talented woman who played the pipe organ,
- In the high school student who played a Christmas medley on the accordion,
- In the old guy who dozed off in the back of the church or
- In the homeless families that came to find their week's shelter there later that Sabbath afternoon?

Was Jesus present when our freshmen confirmands and mentors spoke about the darkness in our world, and in their own lives? Was Jesus somehow seen to them when we spoke about the littlest light being more powerful than the greatest darkness? Did they believe it when I told them that no amount of darkness in their lives could ever douse the Light of the World that dwells in that darkness with them?

Was Jesus present when our Friday morning Men's Breakfast Group talked about friends of theirs who have somehow or another been drawn away from the gathering of God's children here in this place? Was Jesus present when they thought about how they themselves could somehow carry the Light of the World to their friend? Will the Holy Spirit of God empower

them; give them the courage to let that friend know that they are **cared for, missed** and that we **long to have them back** together with us?

Jesus was born, baptized, ministered, lived, died and was raised again to show in word and in deed just how much God loves and accepts us.

At every baptism, after we have lit the individual baptismal candle, we say, **“Let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”** (Matthew 5:16)

Is the Light of the World shining in your life? Do you have a little light to shine for someone else?

Here is another little phrase that we might well use. **“I am God’s child, deserving of love and respect, and God will use me to change the world.”** Do you believe that? God does. Thanks be to God. Amen.