

"The Precious Proclamation"

Luke 3:15-22

January 10, 2016

The Baptism of Our Lord

We all have possessions which are precious to us: home, vehicle (sedan, truck, RV), wardrobe, electronic toys, camping equipment, fishing gear, guns, and so on. We benefit from these things. We take care of these things. We guard and protect these things so they are not damaged or stolen.

Perhaps the most important possession we have is our identity. Your identity allows you to sign up for credit so you can buy your other possessions. Your identity allows you to claim and receive benefits from your school, your place of employment, or the government. Your identity protects you future by allowing you to sign up and receive health insurance, pensions, Social Security funds, and other retirement funds.

Ask those who have been victims of identity theft how precious their identity is. When your identity is stolen, all of that changes. You may suffer financial loss in the present time. Your credit rating may be destroyed so that you can't buy anything on credit. You may lose out on future benefits. You may be financially helpless until your identity is restored. Yes, I'd say that identity is a very important possession.

On this 1st Sunday after the Epiphany – the Baptism of Our Lord – the focus is on identity. Who are you before God? Perhaps a better question is who *were* you before God? The one true God did not create man and woman as the highest forms of animals as evolutionists say. God did not create man and woman to be his sniveling servants and slaves as is the case with many false gods in many false religions. God created man and woman in His image to be His sons and daughters.

Humanity's major problem is one of identity theft. Although Satan is the major architect of that theft, Adam and Eve were willing participants. By Satan tempting them into sin and by their willingness to commit sin, Adam and Eve lost the image of God and their status as son and daughter

of God. They were ushered out of the Garden of Eden and the door to Paradise was slammed shut behind them. Their present existence was ruined. Eve would experience great pain in childbirth. Adam would experience great difficulty in earning his daily bread. Their future was destroyed. They would die and return to dust. Heaven's door would remain locked. Hell awaited them immediately after physical death. Another result of their sin was that all of their descendants – including you and me – would not be children of God either and would share in the misery of our first parents, in this life and the life to come.

Many people might think that I've overstated the case just a bit. Many have very positive images of themselves as good and moral people. In the interest of fairness, it's popular to say that we're all God's children. In a Christmas song by Gene Autry called "Here Comes Santa Claus", one verse says. "Santa Claus knows we're all Gods children; That makes everything right; So fill your hearts with Christmas cheer; 'Cause Santa Claus comes tonight!" We look at the positive self-images people have about themselves and God and the theological pronouncements of American civil religion as shown in that song and others and conclude, "We don't see any lost image of God or stolen identity. We're all pretty good."

But that's the sinister nature of identity theft. You don't see it coming. It's not out in the open. You don't know about it until it's too late - after your checking account's been drained of all funds, your credit score has been destroyed, and you are in financial ruin. Of course you don't know that you've lost the image of God. Of course you don't know that your identity as a child of God has been stolen from you. But what we cannot know by experience or through our corrupted reasoning, the Word of God tells us quite clearly. In writing to the Ephesians, Paul explains very clearly what our original state actually was. He says, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins....and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." (Ephesians 2:1-3) Instead of being children of God and objects of His love, we were all spiritual orphans and objects of His wrath.

Our only hope is for our identity to be restored. We are not able to do that, but God is and He has done just that through His Son, Jesus Christ. We see that happening in the event we

commemorate this day - the Baptism of our Lord. Jesus comes to be baptized, not because He had sin that needed to be washed away, but because *we* have sin that needed to be washed away. He came to the Jordan River and enters the waters of baptism to identify with sinners so that we might identify with Him.

What happens at Jesus' baptism is amazing. First, the heavens were opened. Second, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. Third, a voice from heaven says, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Wow! But, you might say, as wonderful as it is for Jesus to see the heavens open, to have the Holy Spirit come on Him, and for the Father to identify Him as His beloved Son and say He is well pleased with Him, what exactly does it have to do with us and our baptism? We can't even see the heavens in here when a baptism occurs. There are no doves flying around the sanctuary during a baptism. And none of us – not even the proudest among us – would ever claim to be the son of God (or daughter of God) with whom the Father is well pleased.

But baptism is more than a religious ritual or a nice thing to do for tradition's sake. Baptism accomplishes something miraculous in us and for us. Our baptism connects us to Jesus and His baptism. As our epistle reading tells us, we are baptized into Christ - into His death, His burial, and His resurrection. In baptism, we share in Jesus' experiences and in His benefits.

There is now no need for us to die for our sins. Not only has Jesus died for our sins, but we have died, too. In baptism, our old sinful nature has died and been buried with Jesus. Our sins have been washed away and are no longer on our account before God because guilt, condemnation, and punishment do not apply to those who are dead.

But there's more. Not only have we died and been buried, but we have already been raised to newness of life. In our baptism, we are united to Jesus resurrection. As Jesus has been raised from the dead to a new life, so we, too, have been raised from the death of sin to a new life. In baptism, God has begun to restore His image in each of us. He has restored to us our identity in Jesus.

That means that our experience in our baptisms is essentially the same as Jesus' experience in His baptism. When we were baptized, heaven was opened for us. By our sin which we share with

Adam and Eve, we helped close heaven. But God, in baptism, opened heaven to each of us because the sin which closed heaven to us has been forgiven and removed. It is no longer a barrier between us and heaven.

When we were baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon us. He chose not to come in the bodily form of a dove, but He came just the same. The Holy Spirit is the gift promised to us by Peter in his Pentecost sermon. The Holy Spirit entered into our hearts to create the faith to receive the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection to life in heaven won for us by Jesus on the cross and in the empty tomb.

The last experience of Jesus in His baptism may be the most difficult one for us to identify with. The voice from heaven proclaimed, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Jesus is, by nature, the Son of God and none of us here is that. We are human and not divine. But that didn't stop God. There's another way to become a son or daughter of God.

In human situations, babies are born to fathers and mothers and are declared to be their children by this process. Some men and women who are unable to give birth to children go through the process of adoption to make children who have no parent become their children. They search these children out, pay a high financial price, and sign legal documents which proclaim these children to be their sons and daughters with all the legal rights, protections, and privileges given to natural born children.

That's what God has done for us. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "In love [God] predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." (Ephesians 1:4-6) God searched for each one of you and for me. He paid the highest price – the death of His beloved Son – so that we might be adopted as his sons and daughters. In Baptism, He signs the documents that proclaim us to be His sons and daughters with all the rights, protections, and privileges given to Jesus Himself. As the Word of God says, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Galatians 3:26-27)

In baptism, the precious pronouncement was made to each of you and to me: “You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter; with you I am well pleased for the sake of your older brother, Jesus.” Because of baptism, we have the rights and status of children of the Most High God. He will always love us; always forgive us; and always be with us. We have the guarantee of His protection from evil of body and soul as we live in this world corrupted by sin. We have the privileges of new life now in His indirect presence here on earth and eternal life in His direct presence in heaven.

You have been given a precious pronouncement, a glorious gift, and a superior status as sons and daughters of God. Don’t throw it away, as Adam and Eve did, for something this world has to offer. Nothing in this world can compare with being sons and daughters of God. Instead, live as sons and daughters of God live: dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Turn away from the sin God condemns. As Paul says in our epistle, “How can we who have died to sin still live in it?” Instead, with all of your time, skills, and effort, seek, as dear children, to please your dear Father in heaven.

God’s precious pronouncement of us as being His dearly beloved children evokes an equally bold pronouncement from us to our Father. The first hymn which we shall sing during the Distribution of Holy Communion does just that and I draw your attention to it now. Let me quote for you just the beginning words of the first stanza and the closing words of the last stanza: God’s own child, I gladly say it: I am baptized into Christ; Still my soul continues praising: I am baptized into Christ; I’m a child of paradise.” It doesn’t get any better than that. Amen.