

SERMON for Sunday, January 7, 2006
 Isaiah 43: 1-7, Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22
 Baptism of our Lord

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Good Old What's His/Her Name

Not too long ago there was a movie rerun on TV, *The Boy in the Bubble*, a docu-drama about a boy who was born without an immune system. He lived his young life in a protective bubble, devoid of human touch, of exposure to the outdoors, of all the usual ways of growing and learning in a normal environment. To save his life, his parents and doctors protected his life in a bubble. Of course, they couldn't protect him from himself, and his need to love and communicate and belong to a human community.

This is the Sunday after Christmas when, each year, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, when it seems that we read again about John the Baptist and the river, the dove, the voice from heaven, the stern admonishments to the gathered men and women to see the Messiah among them. The picture painted by the gospel writers seems so different than our own picture of baptism, which usually involves a prettily dressed baby, assorted relatives with cameras, beaming but somewhat nervous parents. Or our picture from a different tradition may include adults being dunked in a tank, arising out of the water to proclaim their belief in their Savior Jesus. Whatever the method, whatever the exact words spoken, whatever the record, be it in family photo albums or the gospels, this whole idea of baptism takes a prominent place in Christ's life, in our Christian life. Baptism is more than a nice custom. Baptism is more than an incidental. Baptism is more than a way to welcome children. Baptism is more than an occasional part of the liturgy that makes our service go longer than sixty minutes. Baptism is not an add-on. So although it seems as if we are always talking about it, reading about it, we are once again this morning putting baptism in the middle, shining God's light of understanding.

Many years ago I was visiting some friends north of San Francisco, and one day when they both had to work, I took the train into the city and spent time wandering the streets, riding the cable cars, eating lunch in noisy Chinatown. Needing to rest my tired feet, I went into a lovely hotel, sat in the lobby, ordered some tea, leaned my head back against the comfortable chair and listened to the water in the babbling fountain and the low murmur of other conversations around me. All of a sudden, from the group of chairs directly behind mine, I heard familiar voices, the unmistakable voices of Dave and Carol, friends from Pennsylvania. I hadn't seen them in a number of years, and there they were, resting their feet in the lobby of the same San Francisco hotel on the same day at the same time. We laughed at the coincidence, spent the next couple of hours together exploring the city, and have since reminisced about the odds of it ever happening again.

Have you ever been in a place where you are sure no one knows who you are? It can be while you are on vacation or in a grocery store, or while you are in a hospital or medical clinic, or while you are in a new school classroom or dormitory far away from home, or in a foreign country. It might even be while you are on the local bike path or sidewalk, and all of a sudden the thought pops in your head, *I am all by myself among strangers, and no one knows my name!* Both scary and exhilarating, and all kinds of thoughts start racing. *What if something happens to me and I need help? What if I get lost? Am I in danger? Does anyone know where I am? Does anyone care? Is what I am doing important? Am I important?* There are no answers to those

questions, only our wildest imaginations and then our deep breaths and hopefully calming thoughts. *I have called you by name and you are mine...* This is, I believe, one of the most significant Bible verses and concepts for me personally, and one of the most significant Bible verses and concepts for us together. We are not anonymous. Claimed and named by God, we do not live alone any longer. We may be lonely, we may sometimes feel abandoned by people whom we thought loved us, we may at times be in places literally and figuratively where no one knows our name, but we are not nameless. Some years ago now, when some young people were surveyed about their favorite TV program, *Cheers* was at the top of the list. For those of you who might be young and that title draws a blank in your brain, *Cheers* was a sitcom, aired from 1982 to 1993, in which the regulars of the Boston bar *Cheers* shared their experiences and lives with each other while drinking or working at the bar. It was a place with the motto, *where everybody knows your name*. Back to the survey: it was tops on the list for young people because of that motto, it was important because there *everybody knows your name*. These young people, unknowingly, articulated the importance of baptism.

Did you ever notice how, in the Sacrament of Baptism, we never use the child's family name? It seems a bit odd, when usually the families are here in numbers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles and cousins, the child might be adorned in the baptismal dress used for generations. But we never talk about that family. We never mention Larson or Olson or Smith or Jones. We only use the given name, not the surname, because in God's family that last name is not the chief identification. As nice as the new church directory will be, with its pictures and printed list of members and friends alphabetized and identified, if we were going to have a true directory of the baptized, we would simply be listed by our baptismal names. In God's family, we all belong to God, our Creator and Maker, and God knows our name.

But that is not the end. Baptism is not a bubble of protection, to keep us safe from trials and tribulations, from danger and death, from sadness and sorrow. As surely as we are human beings we will experience our humanity in all its dimensions, beautiful and otherwise. Baptism will not make us immune. Baptism is but the beginning, the beginning of our life in Christ. The story of baptism we read in Luke this morning has some rather intriguing aspects. First of all, the story is about John, John's voice crying in the wilderness, John telling about the Messiah that is to come, John pointing to the Holy Spirit and fire. Secondly, when the subject actually gets around to Jesus and his baptism, there is little fanfare. Many people were baptized, and, by the way, so was Jesus. The moment of baptism is not as important as what happened sometime afterward. Jesus prayed. We are not told the exact minute-by-minute drama. But it was while he was praying that the Holy Spirit descended on him, and he heard God's voice. It was the presence of the Spirit that made the baptism of water a reality.

It isn't our baptisms alone that make us faithful people and a community of faith. The question we need to ask is not have we been baptized, but whether or not we open our lives to the presence of the Spirit, and practice our baptism. One pastor, in his commentary on the scene by the Jordan River described in the gospel, said, *That was the problem with some of the Pharisees and Sadducees whose presence by the Jordan River led to these words of John in the first place. They were all talk and no action; they had lots of religious credentials but very little if any religious character.* And we can't hear that comment without asking if it could be said of us. All talk and no action? Lots of water but no Spirit? Faith but nothing else? Do we act as if we are

baptized? Or it is just a simple rite of passage that we engaged in for ourselves and for our children some time in the near or distant past?

Baptism changes your very identity, your innermost self and your outermost being, profoundly and forever. And while in our heads we agree, it is here that we get stuck. Unless we have some kind of marker on the outside of our homes, like a cross or some other symbol, no one driving by our home will know that we are baptized by water and the spirit. And in the majority of our daily exchanges, at the pharmacy or clinic, at the grocery or on the bus, even at school or work, no one will know that we are baptized unless the topic of religious identity comes up. And unless you wear a particular piece of religious jewelry or item of clothing, no one can tell by looking at you that you count yourself among the baptized. So how is your identity changed? A guest at a Roman Catholic retreat center, home for an order of Roman Catholic sisters, said as she left after several days, *My goodness – your God here works twenty-four hours*. A profound comment? Not especially, but certainly a comment on a profound way of life, a way of life ascribed to by the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary, who live at that center with the purpose: *To know Jesus Christ in the Gospel, to live Jesus Christ in his mysteries, to reveal and to teach Jesus Christ by our whole life: such is our vocation*.

The water of baptism doesn't give us any special powers, any supernatural protection. All that baptism does is change our identity, from an anonymous *what's her name, what's his name, to child of God*. This morning we are going to have as part of our liturgy a renewal of our baptismal vows in creed and affirmation of faith – a liturgy commended to Lutheran congregations - and we will once again be touched. We will be touched by water and spirit, and we will never be the same again.

The liturgy for the Orthodox Christian church for this day of Epiphany, which means God is revealed, includes this prayer:

The earth has been sanctified, O Word, by thy holy birth.

And the heavens with the stars declared thy glory:

And now the nature of the waters is blessed by thy Baptism in the flesh.

And humankind has been restored once more to its former nobility...

Christ is baptized:

He comes up out of the waters

and with him he carries the universe.

Thanks be to God. Amen.