



Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock, and my redeemer. AMEN

New Year's Day this year left Japan with little to celebrate as they experienced a 7.5 magnitude earthquake in Ishikawa. I haven't heard the report this weekend but originally it was thought that there were 55 people who died and many more missing. This disaster could have been much worse if this quake had set off a tsunami, which fortunately it did not do.

However, in Japan on March 11, 2011, 19,759 people died, 6,152 were injured and 2553 people went missing when a tsunami hit Fukushima. A million structures were damaged and over 127,000 buildings completely collapsed. You see a tsunami is caused when the earth plates under the ocean shift. Two mighty plates east of Japan were crushed and twisted until the fault ripped open on that day, leading to this catastrophe. A powerful surge of water came up out of the ocean and left ruins in its wake. Of big concern was that it hit near the Fukushima nuclear plant. What a disaster that was and fortunately the reactors were not damaged and could keep cooling, averting an even bigger tragedy.

The deadliest tsunami in recorded history happened on December 26, 2004, in the Indian Ocean. It was felt by 14 countries with India, Indonesia and Thailand being hit the hardest. This tsunami was caused by an earthquake under the ocean. Over 268,000 people died when that surge of water came ashore.

My point for telling you these statistics is to show that although a waterfall may be beautiful, water can be very destructive. It is a force that humans cannot reckon with. Tsunamis come with great devastation, but sometimes there can be a little bit of good that comes from them. We can learn not to build nuclear power plants close to the ocean. And in the case of the Indian Ocean tsunami, a city on the southern coast of India was uncovered. It had been lost for over 1200 years, but the water washed away its cover and

exposed it. Thus, there was the discovery of an ancient city that held some historical significance.

Tsunamis have something in common with baptism. How you ask? Well, water can be revealing. Fukushima tsunami showed defects in the nuclear power plant and where not to build them. The Indian Ocean tsunami uncovered an old civilization. So too are the waters of baptism revealing. In our Gospel lesson today, in those waters of baptism, Jesus is revealed as God's Son, and we are revealed as God's precious children in our own Baptism.

Today in our reading we have John the Baptist, himself to teach us about baptism. Besides the unusual clothing of camel's hair and an odd diet of locusts and honey, John is set apart from the other teachers of his day. Some theologians believe that it had been over 300 years since God had sent a prophet to his people. And John was called even before his birth to lead the way for the Messiah. And so, he is baptizing the followers that repent. No longer is Israel missing a prophet. John the Baptist with his wilderness proclamation, has people flocking to hear him. And as the paraphrase, the Message says, "he, John, was preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins."

Even though the people of his time often cleansed themselves with water in a simple, self-administered and often used rite, John's baptizing was somehow different. It was not just to cleanse themselves of spiritual impurities or for a Gentile to be converted to Judaism, but it was a "baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins". Those things go together as we know from our Lutheran background. John personally administers baptism, apparently as a one-time rite. Here John has established his own baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John was called by God to baptize the repentant to help them see with new eyes. John is actually telling the Jews that they need God's forgiveness. No matter whether Gentile or Jew, John baptizes them to prepare them for the day when God would come in judgment. It was the step toward this "new life" that means that someday they will need to respond in new and often uncomfortable ways to live in God's kingdom. And through that, the baptized, would come to know who Jesus was. After all that was the main mission of John, to lead the way for Jesus, the one who is coming after him.

And then the story takes a turn when Jesus comes to John to be baptized. Think with me for a minute. This is the opening story in Mark's Gospel. There is no birth story, no manger scene, no angels, no shepherds. Mark's Gospel begins with Jesus, as a fully grown man. Mark wants us to come to know Jesus, as the Son of God and so his writing concentrates on three key scenes in His life: Jesus' Baptism, His transfiguration, and His crucifixion. Mark is a fast-moving Gospel that leads to the cross and leads from the cross back into mission, as the disciples are directed to return to Galilee where they will again see Jesus. This Gospel moves quickly to show us that Jesus is really God's Son, and as the crucified Messiah, he completed God's kingdom on earth for the believers. As faithful disciples of Jesus in our serving Him we discover the true meaning of that "new life".

For a minute, let us take a closer look at Jesus' baptism, by John. They are out in the wilderness, we are told. People are coming from the city to the quiet of the countryside. Maybe for the same reason we live in Park Falls, to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city to a more peaceful and serene atmosphere. And here appears Jesus. And John announces Jesus. This is His call, his proclamation that Jesus has come. The long-awaited

Messiah is here! Jesus is mightier than John. John directs the focus to be on Jesus not on himself. He tells the crowds that he is not worthy to even untie Jesus sandals. Wow, that is something for the crowd to digest as John was one with lots of charisma and power. The point John is making is not that he and his baptizing are insignificant, but that Jesus' is overwhelmingly significant.

John goes on to say that Jesus will be able to baptize them with the Holy Spirit. They knew of the Spirit of God from the prophet Isaiah's teachings. But Jesus, will be able to personally bring them the Holy Spirit. And then Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan.

When Jesus comes up out of the water, "He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." Verse 10. Interesting that in Mark's Gospel, it seems only that it is Jesus who sees the heavens torn apart and the Holy Spirit coming down to Him. And also, note that the voice from heaven is addressing Jesus as well. Our assumption here is that all present hear God say, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

This scene as described here is certainly one that the artists have tried to capture in the years to come. We don't actually know that the others present saw a dove, or if only Jesus did or if it was just a simile to give us a visual. And the Greek word for "on" has many meanings so that the dove, i.e., the Spirit could have landed in Jesus. This is probably the more accurate translation. We then can envision that the Holy Spirit is the controlling, empowering force behind Jesus' ministry. And then God directs his words to Jesus, giving Him the unique status as the Son of God. There should be no more ambiguity as to who this Jesus is. God has answered that question once and for all. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one with God the Father. Here we also have the answer to why baptism is important.

As Lutherans we believe that we need to be baptized only once. During our first communion classes, I always like to emphasize that God gets it right the first time. He always baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Water may be powerful, but it is His word over the water that gives us a baptism of new life in the Kingdom, where we can grow in faith to be all that God has created us to be. When that water is poured over our heads, whether it be when we were a young child or an adult, when the water and God's word come together all heaven breaks loose as the Holy Spirit descends in us to create faith. God claims us in that water, with His Word, as his children and our sins are washed away. All our sins are handed over to Jesus. Not just the ones we have committed to date but all the sins that lie ahead. Satan can have no claim on us ever again. We are marked with the cross of Christ through water and Word. And our lives change forever.

God adopts us all as His Children. He positioned Jesus on earth to show us the way and make the path clear. And John the baptizer led the way so that there would be no confusion as to who the Son of God was. And just as God declared that fact in his words; This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Jesus is then the way to forgiveness, eternal and abundant life, as He later will give up His life on the cross for all His children.

Folks Baptism is exciting. I will never forget the day that I had the privilege of baptizing my only grandchild, Emmett. I had the faith that God was at work in those waters of his baptism. Afterall, it was and still is, God's promise to us, not our promise to him. I believe that baptism is a God act, as it was that day in the river Jordan when John baptized Jesus.

God was and is at work in those powerful waters, as God's word is spoken. God adopted Emmett that morning, right here at our baptismal font, just as He did for you on your baptismal day. We are all his children, not by anything we do or have done. It is not a decision we make. It is totally, fully a God act. God sent His son, Jesus to show us the way and to seal the deal with forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life.

At the beginning of this message, I mentioned how destructive the water of a tsunami can be. Little good can come out of it but mostly death abounds in those rushing waters when they come ashore. But, thankfully, the destructive power of a tsunami pales in comparison to the constructive power of baptism. With just a few handfuls of water all heaven broke loose, and God revealed Jesus to be his Son, the world's Savior. And with three similar scoops of water at our baptism God revealed that we sinners are his chosen children. God's word over the water blessed us with His promises.

And so, we celebrate the baptism of our Lord Jesus today. May we too remember the blessings of our own baptism: adoption into God's family, the church, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. And with the faith the Spirit descends in us, one day we shall be resurrected to eternal life with Jesus. So, thank God for baptism. AMEN