**DANGEROUS BAPTISM: BAPTISM OF THE LORD SUNDAY**

**JANUARY 9, 2022, 2ND SUN AFTER THE EPIPHANY**

**ISAIAH 43:1-7, LUKE 3:15-17, 21-22**

JESUS’ BAPTISM IS A SUITABLE PLACE FOR THE CHURCH TO BEGIN RECOUNTING THE STORY OF HIS LIFE AND MINISTRY. IT’S SUCH AN IMPORTANT STORY THAT ALL FOUR GOSPELS TELL IT. BEFORE JESUS DOES ANYTHING AS A TEACHER AND HEALER, HE HIKES UP HIS ROBE, SCRAMBLES DOWN THE MUDDY RIVERBANK AND WADES INTO THE JORDAN TO BE BAPTIZED BY JOHN.

WHY DOES HE DO IT? THEOLOGIANS HAVE LONG DEBATED THAT QUESTION. WHY MUST THE SINLESS SON OF GOD RECEIVE THIS SYMBOL OF REPENTANCE AND NEW LIFE? IS HE NOT HIMSELF THE VERY WELLSPRING OF NEW LIFE PROMISED IN THE BAPTISMAL WATERS? SOME THEOLOGIANS ARE QUICK TO EXPLAIN THAT JESUS DOESN’T NEED TO BE BAPTIZED, BUT HE LETS HIS COUSIN PUSH HIM DOWN UNDER THE MUDDY WATER PURELY FOR OUR SAKE. WHAT JESUS RECEIVED FROM JOHN THAT DAY WAS NOT A CHRISTIAN BAPTISM, BUT A JEWISH ONE. IN MANY FIRST-CENTURY JEWISH SECTS — INCLUDING THE ONE LED BY JOHN — THE PATHWAY INTO ANY LIFE OF SERIOUS RELIGIOUS DISCIPLINE LEADS THROUGH WATER. AS THE ISRAELITES OF OLD PASSED THROUGH THE RED SEA, SO ANY SERIOUS BELIEVER MUST DO THE SAME.

IF YOU WERE TO MAKE A LIST OF THE WORLD’S GREAT MARITIME TRADITIONS, THE JEWISH PEOPLE WOULD BE FAR FROM THE TOP.

NOBODY EVER ACCUSED THE JEWS OF TRYING TO RULE THE WAVES. THEY HAD A SEACOAST, BUT NO GREAT DESIRE TO VENTURE OUT ONTO THE MEDITERRANEAN (THAT WAS THE SPECIALTY OF THE PHOENICIANS, SOMETIMES CALLED THE PHILISTINES). APART FROM THE MISERABLE EXPERIENCE OF JONAH, THE ONLY JEWISH SEAFARING WE READ ABOUT IN THE BIBLE IS FISHING BOATS BOBBING ON THE SEA OF GALILEE, ALWAYS IN SIGHT OF LAND. THE ANCIENT JEWS WERE A DESERT PEOPLE: IN THE EARLIEST DAYS, NOMADIC HERDERS OF SHEEP AND GOATS. WATER, FRANKLY, TERRIFIED THEM. WHEN THE WRITER OF PSALM 139 IS CASTING AROUND FOR AN IMAGE TO DEPICT EXISTENTIAL DESPAIR, HE CHOOSES AN OCEAN VOYAGE OUT OF SIGHT OF LAND: “IF I TAKE THE WINGS OF THE MORNING AND SETTLE AT THE FARTHEST LIMITS OF THE SEA, EVEN THERE YOUR HAND SHALL LEAD ME, AND YOUR RIGHT HAND SHALL HOLD ME FAST”

JOHN THE BAPTIST’S CONVERTS WADED INTO THE JORDAN WITH TREPIDATION. TO LOSE YOUR FOOTING AND GO UNDER THE WATER WAS TO FLIRT WITH DEATH ITSELF.

MAYBE THIS IS WHY SO MANY CHRISTIANS HAVE COME TO VIEW THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM AS A SPIRITUAL INSURANCE POLICY. THAT LITTLE DOSE OF FEAR OF DEATH FUNCTIONS LIKE AN INOCULATION. EVEN THOUGH MOST CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS NOW TEACH THAT BAPTISM IS NEVER AN EMERGENCY, PLENTY OF NEW PARENTS SEEM TO THINK OTHERWISE. WHEN I WAS A NEW PASTOR, I DON’T KNOW HOW MANY TIMES PARENTS WERE ANXIOUS ABOUT GETTING THEIR CHILD BAPTIZED IN CASE SOMETHING HAPPENED AND THEY DIDN’T WANT THEM TO GO TO HELL..

IT’S SOMETIMES SAID THAT BAPTISM CONVEYS AN “INDELIBLE MARK” — THAT THOSE WHO PASS THROUGH THE WATERS ARE MARKED FOREVER AS CHILDREN OF GOD. IF THAT’S THAT CASE, THEN WOULDN’T IT MAKE SENSE TO ASSUME THAT THE LORD KEEPS A SPECIAL EYE OUT FOR THOSE DISPLAYING SUCH A MARK? YES, IT DOES. BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN THAT WE WHO ARE BAPTIZED — AND WHO HAVE LATER CONFIRMED THE BAPTISMAL VOWS OUR PARENTS MADE FOR US — ARE PROMISED AN EASIER ROAD THAN OTHER HUMAN BEINGS. BAPTISM CONVEYS A PROMISE OF ETERNAL LIFE, BUT IT DOESN’T MEAN THE BAPTIZED RECEIVE A SPECIAL CERTIFICATE OF PROTECTION.

TODAY’S READING FROM THE PROPHET ISAIAH TELLS US WHAT BAPTISM DOES PROMISE DURING OUR LIFE ON THIS EARTH. IT DOESN’T MENTION THE CHRISTIAN SACRAMENT, OF COURSE — HOW COULD IT? — BUT IT DOES SPEAK ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF PASSING THROUGH THE WATERS, AND WHERE GOD MAY BE TRUSTED TO BE AS WE DO SO:

*“DO NOT FEAR, FOR I HAVE REDEEMED YOU; I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME, YOU ARE MINE. WHEN YOU PASS THROUGH THE WATERS, I WILL BE WITH YOU; AND THROUGH THE RIVERS, THEY SHALL NOT OVERWHELM YOU; WHEN YOU WALK THROUGH FIRE YOU SHALL NOT BE BURNED, AND THE FLAME SHALL NOT CONSUME YOU” (VV. 1-2).* WHEN I’VE STRUGGLED THIS HAS BEEN THE SCRIPTURE THAT HAS SUSTAINED ME!

WHY? BECAUSE: “YOU ARE PRECIOUS IN MY SIGHT, AND HONORED, AND I LOVE YOU” (V. 4).

FOR JEWS OF ISAIAH’S TIME, THE PROPHET’S WORDS SURELY CALLED TO MIND THE EXPERIENCE OF THEIR ANCESTORS, WHEN MOSES LED THE HEBREWS THROUGH THE WATERS OF THE SEA TO THE PROMISED LAND.

NOTICE HOW CLOSE THE LORD PROMISES TO BE TO THEM: “WHEN YOU PASS THROUGH THE WATERS, I WILL BE WITH YOU …” THE LORD MAY NOT PROMISE, IN BAPTISM, TO SHIELD US FROM THE SUFFERINGS OF THIS LIFE, BUT GOD DOES PROMISE TO BE WITH US, CLOSE AT HAND, AS WE ENDURE THEM. THE LORD NEVER PROMISES WE WON’T GET OUR FEET WET, BUT GOD DOES ATTEST THAT THE WATERS WILL NEVER RISE UP IN A TSUNAMI AND SMASH US INTO ETERNAL OBLIVION. GOD PROMISES TO ACCOMPANY US THROUGH THIS LIFE, AND EVEN ONWARD TO THE LIFE BEYOND. ISN’T THAT THOUGHT A POWERFUL SOURCE OF COMFORT AND STRENGTH?

THERE ARE TWO MEANINGS TO THIS WORD “ACCOMPANY.” THE FIRST IS THE SENSE OF ONE PERSON WALKING ALONGSIDE ANOTHER. THAT THRILLING STORY FROM THE END OF LUKE’S GOSPEL COMES TO MIND: HOW, ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS, A MYSTERIOUS MAN OVERTAKES TWO OF JESUS’ DISCIPLES WHO ARE SADLY TRUDGING THEIR WAY ALONG. AT FIRST, THEY DON’T KNOW IT’S THEIR LORD WHO’S WALKING WITH THEM. BUT THEN, AS THEY GATHER FOR THE EVENING MEAL AND HE BREAKS THE BREAD, THEIR EYES ARE OPENED AND THEY RECOGNIZE HIM, JUST BEFORE HE VANISHES FROM THEIR SIGHT (LUKE 24:13-35). ISAIAH’S PROMISE IS THAT GOD ACCOMPANIES US, WALKING BESIDE US, IN JUST THAT WAY.

THE SECOND SENSE OF THE WORD “ACCOMPANY” — WITH RESPECT TO THE WAY GOD ACCOMPANIES US — IS FOUND WITHIN THAT LARGER WORD. WE, THE BAPTIZED, ARE MEMBERS OF A LARGER COMPANY: THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRISTIAN BELIEVERS. BAPTISM IS THE SACRAMENT OF ENTRY INTO THAT COMPANY.

THIS MEANS THAT, AS WE ENCOUNTER ROUGH PATCHES IN LIFE, THERE ARE OTHER PILGRIMS AROUND US — CHRISTIAN FRIENDS TO CATCH US WHEN WE STUMBLE AND FALL. IN SEASONS OF HEARTACHE AND LOSS, THERE ARE SISTERS AND BROTHERS PLEDGED TO WALK ALONGSIDE US, TO SHARE WITH US SOME OF THEIR OWN STRENGTH.

WHEN I WAS GOING THRU A DIVORCE, I WOULD SHOW UP AT CHURCH EVERY SUNDAY AND JUST SIT THERE AND CRY. I DIDN’T SING, I DIDN’T PRAY, I CRIED AND I SAT BY AN OLDER WOMAN WHO HAD LOST HER HUSBAND AND WE CRIED TOGETHER AND HELD HANDS AND FOUND A FEW OTHER WIDOWS AND WE ALL CRIED. WE KNEW OTHERS WERE SINGING AND PRAYING FOR US AND THAT’S WAS A GREAT SOURCE OF COMFORT.”

EACH WEEK, IN WORSHIP, WE SYMBOLICALLY LIVE OUT THIS WORK OF BEING, TOGETHER, A COMPANY OF BELIEVERS. INDIVIDUAL PRAYER AND MEDITATION ARE WONDERFUL THINGS — AND CHRISTIAN FAMILY LIFE IS LIKEWISE A WONDERFUL THING — BUT THEY’RE NO SUBSTITUTE FOR LIFE TOGETHER IN THE LARGER COMPANY THAT IS THE CHURCH. THE LORD PROMISES TO BE WITH US AS WE PASS THROUGH THE WATERS. A SIGNIFICANT PART OF THE WAY THE LORD ACCOMPLISHES THAT IS THROUGH EACH ONE OF US, WEEK AFTER WEEK, AS WE GATHER AS GOD’S PEOPLE IN PERSON OR ONLINE.

WE DON’T JUST COME TO WORSHIP FOR INDIVIDUAL INSPIRATION. WE DON’T JUST COME TO RECEIVE. WE COME TO GIVE. OUR PRESENCE IN THE COMPANY OF PILGRIMS IS IMPORTANT TO OTHERS AS WELL.

OUR PRESENCE IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, WEEK AFTER WEEK — PRAYING, SINGING, OFFERING UP OUR GIFTS — IS A MINISTRY TO OTHERS, A WITNESS TO FAITH. IT JUST MAY BE THAT SOMEONE ELSE — SITTING BESIDE US, OR BEHIND US, OR IN FRONT OF US, OR EVEN SEEING OUR NAME POP UP IN THE ONLINE COMMENTS FEED — IS SILENTLY IN PAIN, ENDURING SOME TERRIBLE TROUBLE. MUCH OF THE TIME, WE HAVE NO WAY OF KNOWING THIS. NOR DO WE HAVE ANY WAY OF KNOWING HOW IMPORTANT IT IS TO THAT FELLOW BELIEVER WHO SEES US — YES, US! —

IT DIFFICULT FOR OUR NEIGHBORS TO REMEMBER THAT WHEN THEY PASS THROUGH THE WATERS, GOD IS BESIDE THEM.