

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
January 10, 2010
Isaiah 43: 1-7; Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22
Baptism of the Lord

On the day we hear the gospel story of Jesus' baptism by John in the river Jordan, we too gathered by the font, and witnessed as Nora Marie, with a bit of water from that same river, was baptized. Two years ago on this same Sunday in the year, this first Sunday after the Epiphany, Nora's sister Grace Elizabeth was baptized. Both girls baptized on the day the church celebrates the baptism of Jesus. Both girls claimed and loved as children of God, on the day the story is read of Jesus being claimed by God as his own beloved son. It's a meaningful connection. And one worth exploring. Which is what I'll do next. And by the title you see in the bulletin, you know what this exploration will entail. The story of Jesus' baptism, and our own practice of Christian baptism tell us these three things: We are baptized; we are blessed; we are beloved.

And so --- we are baptized. Not we **were** baptized. The act of baptism may have occurred 20 minutes ago for baby Nora, or 20 years ago for a young adult, or even 40 or 50 or 75 years ago for many of us here today --- but the reality of that baptism is still in the present tense. We are baptized. We are baptized members of Christ's holy church. We are God's sons and daughters. We are part of the whole family of God. That's what it means. The water poured or sprinkled or immersed over our bodies has long since dried --- but not what that water represents, not what that water means. The water seals a promise, so to speak – and the promise is still valid. Being claimed by God doesn't get undone. Once baptized, always baptized. God doesn't revoke God's promises. Even when in exile, like Israel was when the words of the prophet Isaiah came to them, or even when, like many of us, we wander away from time to time and don't pay attention to God, God's love is not taken away, and the seal of our baptism is not removed. Whether we can see it with our physical eyes or not, it's still there. And this is what it says: Do not fear. I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine.

It's been said that Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, was so plagued at times by a sense of unworthiness and despair, that to drive back that despair he often began each day by touching his forehead and reminding himself, "Martin, you are baptized". I want you to do the same – now --- with me. Touch your forehead. Say your name out loud. And then say, "I am baptized".

A couple of stories now:

One comes from the well-known preacher and teacher of preaching, Fred Craddock, in his book *Craddock Stories*. He tells about an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Great Smokey Mountains. A strange and elderly man

came over to their table and introduced himself. "I am from around these parts", he said. "My mother was not married, and the same the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school, I ate lunch alone. In my early teens, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He looked closely at my face. I knew he too was trying to guess who my father was. "Well, boy, you are child of..." and then he paused. When he spoke again he said, "Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance". Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go and claim your inheritance'. I left church that day a different person', the now elderly man said. "In fact, that was the beginning of my life". "What's your name?" Dr. Craddock asked. "He answered, "Ben Hooper". My name is Ben Hooper". Dr. Craddock said he vaguely recalled from when he was a kid, his father talking about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected a fellow who had been born out of wedlock as the governor of their state. His name was Ben Hooper".

I don't know everything about your life. I do know enough to say that we all have things about our lives we're not that pleased with or about. We all have reasons to feel unworthy. But, listen, touch your forehead. We are baptized. We belong to God. God calls each of us by name.

The other story comes from another preacher, Eugene Nelson, who tells about a young man who returned home from his first year at college. He appeared at Nelson's office to tell him that he would not be at church while he was home over the summer. When Nelson asked why, the young man said, "Well, you see, I have been doing a lot of thinking about religion while I was at college, and I have come to the conclusion that there is not much to this religion thing. I found out I don't need the church to get by". Nelson responded by saying that he found all this very interesting. "Aren't you worried?" the young man asked. "I thought you would go through the roof when I told you that!". Nelson had known this boy for about five years, had baptized him a couple of years ago, and watched him grow during his high school years. He came from a difficult family situation. The church had been very interested in him and had a hand in helping him to go to college. "No", Nelson responded. "I am interested in what you said, but not overly concerned. I'll be watching to see if you can pull it off". "What do you mean, 'pull it off'?" the young man huffed. "I'm nineteen, I can decide to do anything I want to do". "Yes, I thought the same thing when I was nineteen", replied Nelson. "What I'm saying is, I'm not so sure you will be able to get away with this". "Why not?" the young man asked. "Well, for one thing", said Nelson, "you are baptized". "So, what's that have to do with anything". "It means that there are people here who care about you. They made promises to God when you were baptized. You try not showing up around here this summer, and they will be nosing around: asking you what you are doing with your life; what kind of grades you made last semester; what you're doing with yourself. And then, there is also God. You see, no telling what God might try to do with you. From what I've seen, once He has claimed you, you don't get off the

hook so easily. God is relentless in claiming what is God's. And, in baptism, God says you belong to Him". He ends his story this way: "The boy shook his head in wonder at this strange unreasonable brand of reasoning and more or less stumbled out the door of my study. In a week or so, he was back at his usual place in the second pew. The baptizers had done their work" (quoted by King Duncan, in his sermon "Better Than a Spanking", www.sermons.com).

We belong to God. We are claimed. We are called by name. We are baptized.

We are blessed. We use the word in a number of different ways – when someone sneezes, we say, "Bless you". We offer a blessing before we eat. Our worship service concludes with this act of worship: Dismissal with Blessing. The word benediction means blessing. *Bene* means good, and *diction* means speech, saying. To bless someone means to say good things about them.

In baptism, we are blessed. We are blessed by God. We are blessed by our parents. We are blessed by the church. Good things are said to us. Good things are said about us. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" the voice from heaven spoke after Jesus had been baptized and was praying. "With you I am well pleased". That's the blessing. God is pleased with Jesus. In his Cotton Patch Version of Luke's Gospel, Clarence Jordan puts it like this: "You are my dear Son' I'm proud of you".

I saw the movie "Precious" late Friday night. I wanted to see it before today, because the words of Isaiah and Luke have been swirling in my head all week, and I wanted to see what connection there was between a movie about a girl named Precious, and two Bible stories which have God telling his people they are precious. It was, in many respects, a difficult movie to watch, but at the same time, in many respects, a meaningful and powerful movie to watch. A girl named Precious is treated as anything but. And that's the irony. Until some other people come into her life, and start giving her the guidance and support and affection and respect she needs, she doesn't know how precious she really is. In the movie all kinds of awful things are said to the girl named Precious. And then she begins to hear good things – and her life begins to go in a new direction, and she begins to have hope, and she begins to make things different for herself, and her two little children. The movie doesn't show it all figured out ---it's not a fairy tale with everyone living happily ever after. But there is some hope, and there is some joy, and the girl named Precious begins to accept her own preciousness. And the spiritual truth here, is that all of us are precious. Whatever our other names, in some sense in baptism we are named Precious. In baptism we are told how precious we are, and living out that baptism means, in some sense, accepting and respecting our own preciousness. Being blessed, having good things said to us, can mean all the difference in our lives. If you are told you are no good – how will you live? If you are told you are ugly, or fat, or stupid, or trouble, or crazy or irresponsible --- how will you live? In baptism the parents tell their children they will be nurtured in the church, that they will be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, and the congregation tells the children they will be surrounded by a community of love and forgiveness, and that they

will pray for them. These are words of blessing. These are good things being said to those who are baptized. You matter, we say. You are important. You are loved.

We will take care of you. We won't forget about you. We will give you what you need to grow in your Christian faith. We help you be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Father Henri Nouwen spent the last years of his ministry sharing his life with the mentally handicapped in the L'Arche community of Daybreak in Toronto, Canada. He tells this story about his community: "There is one of my friends there who is quite handicapped but a wonderful, wonderful lady. She said to me, "Henri, can you bless me?" I remember walking up to her and giving her a little cross on her forehead. She said, "Henri, it doesn't work. No, that is not what I mean". I was embarrassed and said, "I gave you a blessing". She said, "No, I want to be blessed". I kept thinking, "What does she mean?" We had a little service and all these people were sitting there. After the service I said, "Janet wants a blessing". I had an alb on and long robe with long sleeves. Janet walked up to me and said, "I want to be blessed". She put her head against my chest and I spontaneously put my arms around her, held her, and looked right into her eyes and said, "Blessed are you, Janet. You know how much we love you. You know how important you are. You know what a good woman you are". She looked at me and said, "Yes, yes, yes, I know. I suddenly saw all sorts of energy coming back to her. She seemed to be relieved from the feeling of depression because suddenly she realized again that she was blessed. She went back to her place and immediately other people said, "I want that kind of blessing, too". The people kept walking up to me and I suddenly found myself embracing people. I remember that after that one of the people in our community who assists the handicapped, a strong guy, a football player, said, "Henri, can I have a blessing, too?" I remember our standing there in front of each other and I said, "John", and I put my hand on his shoulder, "you are blessed. You are a good person. God loves you. We love you. You are important." (Henri Nouwen, "The Life of the Beloved", preached May 17, 1991 on 30 Good Minutes; reprinted in *Lectio* Homiletics, www.goodpreacher.com).

I didn't see the movie to know this, of course, but the movie serves as troubling reminder that there are too many people, of all ages, who don't know how precious they are, and who need our blessing. Who need to hear good things from us. Who need to know they are loved. That their lives matter --- to God, and to us.

We are baptized. We are blessed. We are the beloved. It's hard, really, to separate, all these pieces out, because they are all part of the whole, and they are all connected with each other. We get them all in one package, so to speak. But still, it's worth highlighting them separately – and so I conclude with what it is to be beloved. "You are my Son, the Beloved" Jesus hears after his baptism. Not, you are my Son, the troublemaker. Not, you are my Son, the bane of my existence. Not, you are my Son, the biggest mistake of my life. Not, you are my Son, the loudmouth, the goofball, the jerk. No, you are my Son, the Beloved.

How else to say it? To be beloved is to be precious, dear, special. It is to know that God doesn't want us to be someone else. God loves us for who we are. God loves us just because.

In our tradition we say that a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Baptism is all about grace. A little girl in a Baptist family raised some questions about the baptism she saw in church one Sunday. "Daddy, why did the pastor push that guy under the water?" The parents tried to answer her question, but the little girl remained unsatisfied. Later that night, they tried to provide an answer from their Baptist perspective in a way a child could comprehend. So they talked about sin and told her that when people decide to live for Jesus and to "be good" they are baptized. They explained that water symbolizes that Jesus washes people from sin; when they come out of the water "clean" it means they are going to try to be "good" from then on. Their daughter thought about this for a moment, and then responded, "Well, why didn't the preacher just spank him?" (King Duncan, "Better Than a Spanking", www.sermons.com).

So even in believer's baptism, baptism imparts grace. It's not protection from evil. It's not something only those who deserve it can receive. It's all about God's grace - God's love, God's presence, God's promise, God's claim on our lives. We can receive that promise as infants or adults. We can sprinkle or pour or be immersed in the water. The water is a sign of the covenant God makes with God's people. A sign of creation, deliverance, sustenance, new beginnings. Not because we have earned it, or deserve it, or even understand it. But because we are loved, and because we are the beloved.

Henri Nouwen's sermon "The Life of the Beloved" begins with this introduction: "I would like to speak to you about the spiritual life as the love of the beloved. As a member of a community of people with mental disabilities, I have learned a lot from people with disabilities about what it means to be the beloved. Let me start by telling you that many of the people I live with hear voices that tell them that they are not good, that they are a problem, that they are a burden, that they are a failure. They hear a voice that keeps saying, "If you want to be loved, you had better prove that you are worth loving. You must show it'. But what I would like to say is that the spiritual life is a life in which you gradually learn to listen to a voice that says something else, that says, "You are the beloved and on you my favor rests".

Baptized. Blessed. Beloved. That's what we are – and, as I bring this message to its conclusion, that's what we are to be about doing. For what we do here in church is never just about us, is it? We are baptized, blessed, and beloved not just for ourselves, but so we can be about sharing what we experience and know and receive from God with others. So we offer the waters of baptism to all who come forward. We are to speak words of blessing – not just to each other – but to everyone. Especially those who are not inside this place with us. We love Nora. We love Grace. We love all the children in our church family. But there are children outside our church who need to know they are blessed. Who need to be told how precious they are, and who need to receive from us those real things that will help them know that. So not just our words.

But our time. Our tutoring. Our food. Our affection. Our books and pencils and coats and boots. Our doctors. Our sleds and basketballs and ping pong tables – and our bodies doing teaching, holding, feeding, clothing, and playing with them. Because, ultimately, as the beloved, we are to be part of and work toward the beloved community. In Dr. Martin Luther King’s view, the goal of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was to “foster and create the beloved community in America where brotherhood is a reality”. Creating this beloved community will require, he said, “a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives”. I don’t think it’s much of a stretch to say that as a church, we are to be about doing and supporting and working for those things that bring about the beloved community in our midst. When Kristin and David, and Dan and Debbie brought Nora to the waters of baptism, they were asked “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?” A church open to people of all ages, nations, and races – well, that’s the beloved community, isn’t it? And that’s our goal ---and that’s our purpose – and that’s our mission – to bring others into this beloved community – where, they, too know they are themselves beloved.

So all this really makes some sort of a full circle, I think. Baptized. Blessed. Beloved. It’s who we are. It’s what we do. It’s what happens to us. It’s what we offer to others. It’s a celebration. It’s a call to action. And it’s all good. Really good. So touch your forehead again, if you don’t mind. And say again these words of affirmation: I am baptized. I am blessed. I am beloved. And then, put a hand on the shoulder of someone next to you – either to your left or right or in front – and now let’s say the words again, this time in the plural: “We are baptized. We are blessed. We are the beloved.” Amen, brothers and sisters. Amen, family of God. Amen, dearly beloved.