

Sermon on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
The Baptism of Our Lord, Sunday, January 13, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Sisters and brothers in Christ, You - Beloved Child of God, grace and peace...

Some of you parents or grandparents have read the book *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch. He published it in 1995, the year my daughter Amy was born, just after we came to Redeemer. So I've read it many times out loud to Amy and to Lori. It started out as a song: "*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, as long as I'm living my baby you'll be.*" It's about a mother who has a baby boy, who sings it for her son every day and night, as he grows up. Even when the child made a mess, talked back, or drove her crazy, she sang that song - even as an adult. Finally, when she grows old, he sings it for her, until the day she dies in his arms.

The author says, "I made up the song after my wife and I had two babies born dead. The song was my song to my stillborn babies. For a long time I had it in my head and I couldn't even sing it because every time I tried to sing it I cried. It was very strange having a song in my head that I couldn't sing. For a long time it was just a song but one day...it occurred to me that I might be able to make a story around the song. Out popped *Love You Forever*....My publisher said, 'This is very strange. It is selling very well in retirement communities in Arizona, where kids are illegal. This is supposed to be a children's book. What is going on?'

'Grownups are buying it for grownups!' In fact, it turned out that parents buy it for grandparents and grandparents buy it for parents and kids buy it for everybody and everybody buys it for kids." People share it because the song, and the book, are about the unending love of a parent for a child: "*I'll love you forever.*"

Today the gospel from Luke tells the story of Jesus' baptism. Jesus isn't a baby any more, he is all grown up, no longer in Mary's arms. Luke says Jesus was about 30 years old, *So in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod Antipas was ruler of Galilee...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as written in the prophet Isaiah....And as the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether HE might be the Messsiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than me is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals" ...Now when all the people were baptized, and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

The baptism of Jesus was a most extraordinary, scandalous event. It's not like Jesus "needed" to be baptized for repentance or the forgiveness of sin. It's a scandal to us, and to the assumptions of the "religions" of humankind, that God would stoop down to us to become vulnerable, mortal human flesh, and to call one common-born human being – not a king or a king's heir – "my Beloved Son!" When God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, son of God, it was a scandal to those who awaited a Messiah, and it's a scandal to us today! Because we find it so hard to believe that God works like that, to call one of us God's Beloved Son, and then to call *you and me: a child of God!* Think about THAT, when you are depressed, or feel worthless, without a purpose in life!

So your baptism was scandalous as well! Or didn't you think of that! We are so used to taking baptism for granted, that we don't think about the scandal of it all, that you and I could be called "a beloved child of God" by Almighty God! We have never thought that we deserved it, or entitled to this "title" or this love. The gospel itself is based on the Paul's premise that *we all have sinned and fall short of God's glory, but we are now justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ...for you and I are justified (made righteous) by God not by works of the law but by faith.* So the real scandal is, that human being that you are, warts and all, a sinner as well as a saint, you and I hear the same words that Jesus heard when he was baptized, "*You are my beloved child, and with you I am well pleased!*" It's incredible, it's shocking, unexpected, a scandal!

For when you were baptized, the pastor poured water on your head (or immersed your body in water), and said "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." You were named as a child of God, beloved by God, you were given the promise of life forever along with forgiveness of all your sins, and you became a part of the Body of Christ, the Church, forever. Why you? Why me?

So what is baptism for you and me? Martin Luther in *The Small Catechism* said, "Baptism is not simply plain water. Instead, it is water used according to God's command and connected with God's word. Baptism brings to you and me forgiveness of sins, redeems you and me from death and the devil, and gives you and me eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare. For *"the one who believes and is baptized will be saved."*

So I began this sermon with the song sung by Robert Munsch at the death of his stillborn children: *I love you forever.* Luther Seminary professor Karoline Lewis talks about *The Power of You* – both in the second person singular "you", and the plural "You-all"! Second personal singular, direct address "Hey, you!" is most personal, while "you all" puts us into a community. Only Luke and Mark use this word "you" in Jesus's baptism. But direct address from heaven? That's powerful! God in heaven looks down to earth, sees Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist, God's messenger, and says "*With you, my Beloved Son, I am pleased!*"

So today is not just about Jesus and his baptism by John, a festival that we celebrate in churches all over the world. Today is also about YOU – and me – and children of God all over the world, all human beings made and beloved by God! For that is where we must start when we think about ourselves – you and I are beloved by God – and about others, all other human beings, no matter what race, color, gender, language or faith – all are beloved by God. That premise “we are all God’s children” is foundational to how we see others, and how we treat them, as well as how we look at ourselves – as persons of priceless worth and value.

We see this in our first lesson from the prophet Isaiah to exiles in Babylon, in a passage I have used many times with persons preparing for surgery, who have a life-threatening disease or condition, or who are facing death. Before prayer, we often read this passage: *“But now, says the Lord, he who created you, he who formed you: 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....Do not fear, for I am with you.”*

These days in our lives, when there is so much to fear, God tells you and me: “Do not be afraid. Have faith, for I am with you.” We look around us at other churches, and see our neighbor churches close. We see our own congregation dwindle in numbers for Sunday worship, and ask “How can this be? What is our future?” We seek to be faithful. We open our doors to families needing shelter or a safe place to sleep, to people seeking a meeting place to confront their demons and addictions, to congregations of immigrants needing a place to worship, we feed the hungry and help the homeless find a home. We seek to do good, to be faithful as God’ church, so shouldn’t we be blessed, thriving and growing?

Well, yes, if you think the sign for blessing is thriving and growth! But what if it isn’t? What if the sign of God’s blessing is *suffering*? This is one of Martin Luther’s “Marks of the Church” after all, just like worship, baptism, Word, eucharist, confession and ministry. Not the blessing of rewards, but the blessings of compassion, responsibility and opportunities for witness. Our blessing could be opening our doors and people come in who are fighting addictions, seeking safety, needing a place to sleep, or a home for worship, *sharing their suffering*. We might think it’s a burden and a struggle, but to God – it’s a blessing, a calling for God’s beloved children, to be a witness, a place of safety, a people who open our doors!

So as we ponder our future as the Church, wonder what our mission is, and what purpose there is for this building – this sacred space - we remember the promise of God, who says *You are my beloved child. When you go through the flood waters, or walk through fire, you are mine*. Remember the song that Robert Munsch sang to his babies who had died at birth: *I’ll love you forever, I’ll like you for always, as long as I’m living, my baby, my child, my church you will be. Amen.*