

“Immersed in God’s Love”

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3: 13-17, 21-22

If we were Eastern Orthodox Christians, I would greet you on this 7th day of January by saying *Merry Christmas*. That’s a new discovery for me. I thought that yesterday, January 6, the Feast of Epiphany, was considered to be the Orthodox Christmas. Apparently it is for some, but not for others. A few years ago, a first generation Ukranian-American woman began lobbying the powers-that-be at Rockefeller Center not to take down the big Christmas tree until after January 7. This is only the second or third year that it has remained up this long and if my information is correct, it will come down sometime tonight.

The discrepancy in the dates is confusing because some use the Julian calendar which is different by some 13 days from the Gregorian calendar which is now the standard in the Western world. On the Julian calendar, December 25 corresponds to January 7 in the Gregorian calendar, and Epiphany to January 19.

“I’ve had an apostrophe,” declares Smee. “I think you mean an epiphany,” replies Hook in the 1991 movie. I’m more in line with Smee. I’ve only had an apostrophe in this matter. I’m sure things would be clarified if I talked to some Orthodox Christians rather than to Mr. Google!

One thing is clear – in our Western tradition, the Feast of Epiphany focuses more on the coming of the Magi, those Gentiles from the East, signifying the universality of God’s love. In the Eastern tradition, the Feast of Epiphany focuses not only on the Nativity, but also upon Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River. According to tradition, the baptism of Jesus marked the only occasion when all three persons of the Holy Trinity manifested their physical presence simultaneously to humanity: God the Father by speaking through the clouds, God the Son being baptized in the river, and God the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove descending from heaven.

Those who celebrate Christmas on a date other than December 25 and associate it with events other than the Nativity are most fortunate. They have some distance from all the commercial hoopla. Also, their celebrations will be more solemn and holy, as Orthodox traditions are. That doesn’t mean they are without fun and excitement. One of the ways the baptism of Jesus is celebrated is for the priest to proceed to the nearest body of water and after a short ceremony he tosses a cross into the water. Young men between the ages of 16 - 18 then dive into the water to recover the cross. The first one who does and returns it to the priest, is given a special blessing. That ceremony is a particularly big deal in Tarpon Springs, Florida. Each year it receives great media coverage. Yesterday, one young man said, “This day is what I’ve been thinking about all year long.”

Diving into the baptismal waters can be terrifying. I don’t mean that you might not be a good swimmer, but at its heart, baptism means we are under new ownership – we belong to God, not to ourselves. If you take baptism seriously, and that’s a big if, life will never be the same afterwards.

It's not easy to let go of the old hand-holds and to turn your back on the world's ways. Terrifying though the baptismal waters may be, you nevertheless discover that in them you are immersed in God's love, a love that casts out fear.¹ **“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...”**²

Perhaps the terror of baptism can be compared to the experience of having your doctor show you the MRI of your 17-year-old daughter taken only hours ago, indicating a brain tumor that must be removed as soon as possible. That was the experience of my nephew and his wife recently. For two weeks they have been immersed in a world unknown to them in which they could think of nothing else. The 5-hour surgery took place this past Tuesday. Thank God, the news gets more encouraging with each passing day. My nephew called me a couple of nights ago. “It's been a life-changing experience, Unc! Nothing will ever be the same again.”

There's a commercial playing on TV these days which pictures a woman being plunged feet first into a glass of Alka-seltzer. Medicine may help with surface pain, but we need to be immersed in something more when navigating deep waters or walking through fiery trials. I know that my nephew was immersed in more than the world of medicine and technology because he really called to thank me for the prayers. Wrapped around that scary environment of a hospital was an overlay of God's love³ reminding him that he was surrounded by an extended family greater than he could imagine.

Of course, a little sprinkle on the head that dries quickly and is forgotten is hardly an experience of being immersed in God's love. That's why the Westminster Larger Catechism calls upon Christians to pursue the “neglected duty of *improving* our Baptism.”⁴ *Improving* is archaic language from 17th century England that simply means we must remember our Baptism at every opportunity we can.

The church has argued for centuries about the practice of Baptism – is it necessary to be immersed as Jesus was, or are a few drops of water sufficient? I can't say it better than Frederick Buechner: “Baptism consists of getting dunked or sprinkled. Which technique is used matters about as much as whether you pray kneeling or standing on your head. Dunking is a better symbol, however. Going under symbolizes the end of everything about your life that is less than human. Coming up again symbolizes the beginning in you of something strange and new and hopeful. You can breathe again.”⁵

A Presbyterian and a Baptist were arguing. The Presbyterian asked the Baptist if he considered a person baptized if he was immersed in water up to his waist. “No,” said the Baptist. “Do you consider him baptized if he is immersed in water up to his neck?” Again the Baptist's answer was: “No.” “Well now,” said the Presbyterian, “suppose you immersed him up to his eye-brows? Would you consider him baptized then?” “No,” came the answer. “Well, then, there you have it!” said the Presbyterian. “It's only the little bit of water on the top of the head that counts!”

Jesus was “dunked!” Still, he didn't waste any time *improving* his baptism. Immediately afterwards, he was praying. Listen to what he heard when he did: **“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you**

I am well pleased."

Listen to what God says to the people of Israel who were at the end of their rope living in exile in Babylonia: "**Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.**"⁶

You may think that the words, "**You are my ... beloved; with you I am well pleased,**" are words reserved exclusively for Jesus, but consider this. The question is often asked, "If Jesus was without sin, why was he baptized?" Matthew tells us that John the Baptist demurred when Jesus came to him, "**I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not you!**"⁷ The best answer to that question is that Jesus' baptism is a sign of his solidarity with us. It is a sign of what the Letter to the Hebrews later says in referring to Jesus, "**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**"⁸

If Jesus wants to share human life with us in every respect, is it too hard to imagine that he wants us to share his life in every respect as well, including the blessing, "**You are my ... beloved; with you I am well pleased**"? In Jesus, God became human so that in Jesus, we might become divine, not in the sense that we can become a god or be on equal status with Jesus. But divine in the sense that we reflect more clearly the image of God in which we were made, able to love God and neighbor because we know that we are loved with an inestimable love by a Power far greater than we can imagine. You are beloved by God, even though at times you are not very lovable. God is well pleased with you, even though at times God is not pleased with what you do. Still, you are beloved by God!

Years ago I had a poster in my office that pictured Raggedy Ann and Andy. The caption read, "Don't take yourself too seriously." I try to live by that motto, not to belittle myself but I believe that because God takes me most seriously, I don't have to. If I can let God be God, then God lets me be me.

In his eulogy of Gerald Ford, President 41 said, "He had a wonderful sense of humor, and even took it in stride when Chevy Chase made the entire world think that this terrific, beautifully coordinated athlete was actually a stumbler. Ford thought it was funny." I identify with what Ford said when he took the oath as Vice-President: "I'm a Ford, not a Lincoln." Of course, since my father always drove GM cars, I'd have to say, "I'm a Chevy, not a Cadillac." When you are immersed in God's love, you can laugh at yourself.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells about her Grandmother, Lucy. Whenever Barbara would visit her, there were all sorts of treats for her, but the best part were the baths. Each night Grandma Lucy would draw a hot bath filled with suds, and with her big sponge she would polish Barbara's skin. Then, following the bath she would anoint her granddaughter's body with Jergen's lotion all the way down to the soles of her feet. The perfect ending would be the Evening in Paris dusting powder when Lucy would tickle Barbara's body with a pale blue powder puff. Barbara writes; "When Grandma Lucy

was done, I knew that I was precious, I was absolutely convinced that I was loved and nothing has happened since to shake that conviction.”⁹

Remember your baptism no matter how much water was used and you, too, will be absolutely convinced that you are loved.

Endnotes

1. 1 John 4:18
2. Isaiah 43:2
3. See Colossians 3:14
4. Book of Confessions, 7.277 (Question 167 in the Catechism)
5. *Wishful Thinking*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 5
6. Isaiah 43:1
7. Matthew 3:14, *The Message*
8. Hebrews 4:15-16
9. From *The Preaching Life*, p. 17; quoted in a sermon by Susan R. Andrews in Lectionary Homiletics, January 2001, p. 6.