

First Sunday after the Epiphany/Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, January 7

The first Sunday after Epiphany remembers the Baptism of our Lord when Jesus stood in the Jordan River and John the Baptist baptized him along with the multitudes who streamed out there from Jerusalem and “all of Judea” as the Gospels say. The observant preacher notices that this feast is a bookend for the season of Epiphany along with the Feast of Transfiguration. Both of these days see white on the altar and feature a voice from heaven which declares Jesus to be the Son, beloved and worthy of our hearing.

Those words from heaven are really the central message or theme of the Epiphany season. Who was that child whom the Wise Men worshipped on bended knee with precious gifts? The Sundays which fall between the hearing of those words are best understood as an exploration of that statement made by the Father. This carpenter from Nazareth is far more than he appears to our eyes. He is the Son of the Most High, the Logos who has mysteriously and beautifully pitched his tent in the flesh of humanity.

We will see this Jesus doing all sorts of marvelous things, and finally, on the first Sunday of Lent, the words from the cloud will be put to the test in the Temptation. There the evil one will cast them back at Jesus, “If you really are the Son of God, turn these loaves into bread...” Thus the season bridges the time of Christmas and the Paschaltide. It reveals that the babe in the manger is much more than the humble child he appears to be, he is the Son of God, sent to do battle with our ancient enemy and he wins the day. That battle will be joined in the season of Lent and Easter as Jesus ascends Golgatha’s cruel crest.

But for us there remains a real question about the Baptism of Jesus: What is he doing in that water? John’s own description of his baptism is that it is a baptism of the repentance of sins. If he really is the Son of God, he has no sins to repent of. What is he doing in that water? Either he is not really the Son of God, or this is all some horrid mistake or it is a matter of sweetest Gospel. You can probably guess which of those options my personal preference is. I opt for the Gospel thing. I believe that Jesus in that river, repenting in my place, because even when it comes to repentance I am a failure at meeting divine expectations.

In the waters of the Jordan, Mark and the other Gospel writers tell us that Jesus took on the sins of the whole world. In that sense, he belongs in the line with the rest of us penitents; in fact, he has far more reason to be there. He does not just carry those sins lightly or as some sort of a incidental part of his humanity, but as it says in Corinthians, God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us (II Corinthians 5:21). Read that carefully, Jesus not only took our sins, but he became sin for us so that we might become the very righteousness of God. He would carry that prickly burden, live that damned life to its bitter and dreadful end, hanging on a cross, when the Devil’s tail twitched with glee and he thought he had won a victory over his enemy and our friend.

Of course Easter puts a damper on Satan’s party and gives heart to our celebrations every Sunday. We are laying the necessary ground work for our celebration on Easter. This festival of

Jesus Baptism also has Trinitarian and Christological implications. If it is not the Son of God who ascends Calvary's dour slope, our sins remain our own. If he does not die there, our sins return to us. But when He, God's only-begotten Son, takes our sins and goes all that way to that cross, sins are forgiven, life is restored. The Son of God has accomplished his task.

The Baptism of our Lord is a time which naturally gives us an occasion to remember our own Baptism. But the preacher needs to exercise a little caution here. The baptism in which we were baptized is not of the same specie as the baptism of Christ. John makes no claim that this baptism gives life or that it incorporates the baptized into the body of Christ. We will hear Paul speak of our own baptism today and the point of this passage is that we would be able to notice the differences. Indeed, we read at the end of Acts 18 and the beginning of Acts 19, Paul re-baptized those who had received the baptism of John.

Even though we are talking about two different sorts of baptism, they are also connected. Our baptism is potent and effective because Jesus underwent this baptism. Our baptism is not joining Christ in this baptism but simply joining him. In that sense, they are connected, but not because they both share water, but because our washing has united us with him who repented of the whole world's sins in Jordan's flood. It is a subtle point which likely won't make it into the sermon, but the preacher needs to avoid the Anabaptist pit here. For the Anabaptists (you know them simply as Baptists) make no distinction between John's baptism and ours, insisting that they are simply continuing the baptism of John and our baptism is simply a baptism of repentance and not a life giving flood.

All this can give us an occasion to address the whole issue of repentance and why we do it. It is unlikely that Advent really let us repent much, but not that Christmas is over and the New Year festivities are behind us, we are far more likely to be in a penitential mood. The weather is dark, the Christmas bills are starting to show up in earnest, our resolutions have likely all been broken by this point. Penitence may well be on the mind of folks.

Why should we repent if Jesus has repented fully and completely for us? Too often our people think that God forgives folks who repent, as if somehow our repentance made us worthy of forgiveness. But this is simply the same theology that Luther fought against with indulgences. People of that time thought that they were earning God's favor. We have simply created another sort of indulgence with repentance.

This text allows us to preach another and much better/authentic reason to repent. We do not repent because this makes us somehow acceptable or more acceptable to God. God made us acceptable in Christ. Rather, from the account of the Baptism of Christ, we repent because repenting makes us look more and more like Jesus who stands in these waters today. He is perfectly repenting, something I will never quite get. But Jesus has already taken up his righteous life in each of us through Baptism. Repentance is not us meeting the bar of God's approval, it is us being drawn into the very being which God has called forth in Baptism.

What is going on here with repentance? Why is Jesus doing this? Why does God call for our repentance?

1. We dare not turn it into a new work which we must do in order for God to forgive us.
2. Example? Problem with this is that we will inevitably turn this into Law. It is true, but it doesn't have the effect we might think it does.
3. God does not need our confession – but we need to say it. This however might be curving into a therapeutic language. If I repent because it is good for me, am I really repenting or am I just engaged in a form of self-therapy, thereby putting the burden for our care squarely back into our own laps. (I am not against therapy mind you, I just don't confuse it with the Gospel.)

So, if Jesus has repented because I have failed in my own repentance. I am inadequate, why then should I repent? Why should I go through this exercise when Jesus has already done it? Indeed, isn't my repenting just denying Christ's repentance for me?

The key to me seems to be the idea of unity with Christ. I am not, in my repentance, making some payment to God which opens the floodgates of forgiveness. Rather, the Jesus whom I read and see repenting today is in the waters of the Jordan repenting of my sins. That Jesus is inside me, quite literally, and that means that repenting Jesus is also found in repentance today. He repented of my sins there, he repents of my sins every day.

Collect of the Day

Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Notice the source of the action here. God declares Jesus to be his Son. God anoints him with the Holy Spirit. Likewise in our own baptism, God makes us faithful to our calling, God makes us co-heirs with Christ of everlasting life.

The prayer asks us to be faithful to our calling as God's children and heirs. Do you suppose that most Christians in North America are even cognizant of that? Last week if you preached the adoption metaphor we discussed in class, you might want to follow up with some sort of a notation of this prayer and its prayer that we be faithful to what God has called us to be.

But what does that faithfulness entail? When we are given the name of God, we literally carry it around with us. In the Lord's Prayer we pray for His name to be holy; we are praying that our lives live up to that noble name that we bear. In much the same way that we might make our parents proud of us, we are praying that God would be able to rejoice over our deeds.

And to be faithful as heirs with Christ would suggest that we live our lives as though heaven was ours, our home, our place. That should completely change the way that we think about our possessions here on earth and the way we use our gifts from God. We dare not live as if they are the final tally of our success, not when we know that the genuine measure of the man is to be found before his judgment seat.

But that is so much law, isn't it. God has called us children and made us heirs. Those are life changing things. If some has adopted us, if they have written us into their will, our primary assessment of that reality is not that now we have a burden to bear and a set of expectations to which we must live, we rejoice to be included in a family and given a name and blessed with love. We are glad to be the recipient of a gift we have not earned but which is given in love. It is that joy, and that realization of a gift bestowed that really changes the life of the Christian.

When we hear the word "make...(them) faithful" I believe we usually hear a coercive word there. But the Latin original and the Greek which lies beneath that, the two ancient liturgical languages of Christendom, would have the first connotation of that word to be creative, not coercive. Thus this prayers as God to "create them to be faithful...." I think that sounds differently than most folks will hear it. This is why we get the Genesis reading as our first reading today.

Readings

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

What is the creation event doing here on the day we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord? Is this here because in this text we see the creating Father, the spoken Word and the hovering Spirit? It is here because the same voice that speaks in the creation event is speaking on the day of Jesus's baptism and he spoke on the day of our baptism, naming us as His children? God speaks and things happen. His voice is performative, that means it accomplishes what it says. We encounter this in human speech when we marry someone. The pastor or justice of the peace pronounces the bride and groom to be husband and wife. It is in that pronouncement that the deed is done. That is a performative speech or utterance.

God said, "let there be.... And there was." Again and again that refrain repeats throughout these verses. One cannot escape the power of words in this text. This is the same voice that speaks from heaven in this text and the same voice which speaks in absolution and baptism and

Lord's Supper to us. "This is my body" he says to us today. "This is my child" he says in every baptism. "This is my Son." It always speaks truth and when it needs to, it makes what it says.

We may want to preach creation this day. It is actually a little tangential to the Gospel reading, but it would work. The Logos has entered creation, the creation he has made. One cannot really appreciate what Jesus does in the Gospel lesson if we have no understanding/conception of the creation. But this is also a bit of a minefield for the preacher. The bible is much more interested in a different question set than the post-enlightenment world brings to these texts. That "scientific" reading of Genesis has radically distorted our hearing of these words. We are asking what the medieval philosophers and theologians would have called questions of material and efficient causes. We want to know how and when things happened. The Bible is answering questions about first and final causes here, not so much how and when something happened but that it happened and why it happened.

Of course this just happens to be the subject of my dissertation and I could perhaps go on for hours on this. If you feel the need, please skip to the next reading with my permission at this point while I pontificate for a few paragraphs.

Augustine thought that this was a most interesting passage. He was much more interested in the "thatness" of creation rather than our current fixation on the how of creation. He saw that the very existence of the world was attributable, most logically, to God. Where else could it have come from? He took this passage very seriously and when it says in the first verse that God created heaven and earth in the first verse, he thought that verse was the creative moment. The subsequent days of creation were not creative, per se, but organizational, the days in which God took the raw material he had created in verse one and gave it the forms which we know today. He called this diversification and ornamentation. The first three days were diversifying the various sorts of creation – the light, the sky, and the earth. The next three days were ornamenting those three things. The light got sun, moon and stars on day 4 and the sea and sky got fish and birds on day 5 and then the earth, on day six, got animals and mankind. These were not God creating new stuff, but rearranging the created raw matter that happened in the first verse, before there ever was a day.

Just to make matters more interesting, Augustine did not think that these were days at all, but rather logical markers, in much the same way that we might describe a logical sequence of events using temporal markers when in fact the event was instantaneous. In fact, Augustine thought the whole notion of God needing six days was rather odd. He thought the creation happened in an instant.

The point of this little excursus is not that Augustine is right. I don't know, I wasn't there, But that is exactly the point. The preacher needs to exercise a little caution here. We are in grave danger of talking out of both sides of our mouth on some of these issues. We insist that the six day creation must be interpreted literally, and yet, Augustine, who is far more literally attentive to the text than we are, comes up with a radically different interpretation than we do. What does that mean?

I think what I take from this is a real appreciation for the wisdom of the ancient leaders of Christendom who insisted that prior to baptism their catechumens confess “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” And they left it there. They did not insist on a six day creation because they had men like Basil who said “six literal days” and they heard men like Augustine who said “an instantaneous moment.” And then they also listened guys like Origen who flat out denied that Genesis 1 was to be read historically at all. And all of them were counted as fathers of the church and all of them found room under that confession of faith. There is much we do not know, but we do know this because God said it. He made it, He loved it, and in Christ He redeemed it. Exactly how that happened, I would be loathe to be too assertive in what I preach. There is much room in here for faithful people to disagree.

Here is what Augustine said in Book XII, chapter XVIII of his Confessions on the subject:

My God, light of my eyes in that which is obscure, I ardently affirm these things in my confession to you. So what difficulty is it for me when these words [of Genesis] can be interpreted in various ways, provided only that the interpretations are true? What difficulty is it for me, I say, if I understand the scriptural author in another sense? In Bible study all of us are trying to find and grasp the meaning of the author we are reading, and when we believe him to be revealing truth, we do not dare to think he said anything which we either know or think to be incorrect. As long as each interpreter is endeavoring to find in the holy scriptures the meaning of the author who wrote it, what evil is it if an exegesis he gives is one shown to be true by you, light of all sincere souls, even if the author whom he is reading did not have that idea and, though he had grasped a truth, had not discerned that seen by the interpreter?

That should be enough of that for one reading.

Psalm 29

Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

² Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.

³ The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over many waters.

⁴ The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

⁵ The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

- ⁶ He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- ⁷ The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
- ⁸ The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- ⁹ The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth
and strips the forests bare,
and in his temple all cry, “Glory!”
- ¹⁰ The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
- ¹¹ May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

This psalm reflects the Gospel off the substrate of the Genesis text. Clearly the Psalmist is talking about the creation event, but notice the scope of what he praises God for. He praises him for the thunderous voice of God which roars in the waters and which causes Lebanon to skip like a calf (earthquakes) and breaks the cedars (winds). The voice of God flashes forth in fire (lightning) and yet the voice of God also makes the deer give birth and in response the whole assembly cries “glory!”

This God is found in a line of penitents today and in the preternatural voice which comes from heaven itself. In the Christ, the voice of God which can roar is muted today. It is the voice of God which tells the deer when and where to give birth, that gentle voice, which speaks today in love and mercy. Jesus, who is the Word of God, speaks a beautiful message of Gospel today, not judgment and terror. Can we hear it?

Romans 6:1-11

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life

he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

This is one of the most important passages in all of Paul's literature and especially for those of us who hear these things sacramentally. I teach a class on the Lutheran Confessions and I am becoming increasingly distressed by just how Calvinist we American Lutherans have really become. My most Lutheran students reflect their American Protestantism far more than they do their Lutheran Catechism. We read this as a Calvinist and seem only to be able to hear a burden laid upon us to some sort of holiness of life. We imagine that the sinful corpse can somehow still manage to please God, and thereby close our eyes to the new life which He has created within us in Christ.

The solution to this is not to be found in our own willful reorganization of our own minds, but in Christ's rule of our mind. "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus..." Philippians 2:5 *Or as Paul says later in Romans itself, in chapter 12,*

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This passage calls on us to reconsider our own very life and the deeds and things which flow out of our very being. Paul is dealing with the whole question of why we do the good things that God would have us do, the obedience that comes from faith which is found in the opening and closing words of this letter. Why do we do good? Paul's answer is that we have been utterly transformed, brought to death in baptism and raised a totally different sort of person from that water.

Yes, Paul appeals to us to change our sinful ways as John did, but Paul is appealing to the redeemed person, to the person whose life is defined by the Christ event so he speaks with a different sort of hope than John did. John spoke only of realizing our sinfulness before the presence of God. Paul speaks of that same realization plus the realization that God has indeed done something about that sinfulness in Christ. Now, connected to the cross through the waters baptism, united with Christ in his death, I am a person who lives a completely different sort of life. I am no longer living as if the scale balancing is something that I must do. I am freed from the petty needs and self-serving ways of this world. That is all behind me because Christ has put it behind me.

This changes the way I preach about good works too. I am no longer in the business of peddling holiness and righteousness in steps. I am about a flood of righteousness, an outpouring of God's perfection on the people to whom I speak. They are not transformed as they react to my words and put their minds to what I have to say, my words themselves are the instruments of God's

holiness to come to them. The water I splash, the meal I serve, not because I did it but because he does it, these things become the instruments of change.

The real question becomes how does one speak to that redeemed man? Paul struggles with this in the next chapter as he acknowledges that he is himself quite conflicted in this regard. There is a war going on inside of his mind and his body. The good he wants to do, the good his redeemed self resolves to do, is often not what he does, and the evil he abhors is the very thing he finds himself doing. Ultimately, who will free him? Praise to Christ, he has freed Paul and he will resolve that same tension in our own lives.

We too must consider ourselves dead to sin. That is a mental act. That is where this all starts. We cannot get the holiness or the goodness, or Paul's preferred word, righteousness, by doing it. It starts with who we are, not what we do. We are human beings, not human doings. Paul calls us to consider ourselves dead to sin, because Christ has achieved that.

Mark 1:4-11

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² *As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,*

*“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,*

³ *the voice of one crying in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”*

⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

¹² *The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.*

Notice Mark's telling of the story of Jesus Baptism. It is the shortest of all the accounts, hence the reprise of John's ministry in the first verses. I have included the opening words which we heard in Advent and the immediately following words which we will hear on the first Sunday in Lent. This is the whole of Mark's intro to the ministry and passion of the Christ. From here he simply launches into a telling of what Jesus did. Please don't get me wrong, here. This is not a criticism, but it is simply an observation. Mark is in a hurry to get to what he thinks is the important part of the story.

Notice how violent all this is. Immediately, the heavens are torn open, releasing dove and voice. When Jesus goes into the wilderness he is thrown out there. The Greek word for this is the same word one uses when casting a spear. The Spirit literally throws Jesus into the wilderness. Mark is using brutal language.

That strong language is also found in the hyperbole he uses. The whole country came out to see and hear John. He had some sort of rock star status in the ancient world. Can you imagine people flocking to hear a prophet that way today? Perhaps it is not so hard to imagine when one remembers that the latest video of some silly pet trick or a wedding fiasco can generate literally millions of downloads from the internet.

If we will flock to watch some squirrel riding around on a miniature surf board or a groom falling into the water at his poolside wedding, is John really that hard for us to understand? Perhaps it is really something of an indictment that at least the people of his generation went to hear something of substance. He spoke to the fears of his generation and they responded. But what does our ability to surf to a funny web video say about us? Are we afraid of being bored? Are we starved for joy? Do we simply enjoy watching the misery of another?

Today thousands of Christians are made all over the world. What are they listening to? What will the folks of North America listen to? Mel Gibson did his best to make the passion of Christ into a blockbuster movie, but I don't see a markedly deeper or better spirituality as a result. What about that Carpenter of Nazareth, who called John and who calls us to preach his word today, speaks to the deepest fears and longings of this generation? What about Him fills that empty spot for them? Somehow we are not communicating it very well, the statistics don't lie to us. The church in North America is not flourishing as it ought to do. What connection are we not making?

I don't know that I have the answers. I do know that the Jesus who entered those muddy Jordan waters that day loves the people of this time and would welcome each of them, one at a time, into his loving embrace. I know that he shed his blood for them and would unite them in his death so that he might rise with them to newness of life. I know that they need what he has to give, and yet I watch the cars zip by my church's parking lot on Sunday morning like the rest of us do. If they were going to the church down the street I would be happy, I guess, but too often they pull into the Safeway lot or Walmart, or simply to their own home as they come home from work.

What do they need that my Lord can give them through me? None of those folks who came out to see John that day expected to see the heavens torn open and to hear the voice of God speak about some other guy. And yet, that is what they got. They were there to hear someone speak who had authority to say something to them, even if it was uncomfortable to hear. John did not apparently pander when he preached.

What brings them out today? Does anything?

In the past when we considered this text we wondered: Have we spent altogether too much time telling folks what they should and should not do, and failed to tell them what he has done? Do we see them flocking to Obama or the concert or the beach because that is telling them what they need to hear?

At what point does it become pandering to the sinful desires of the person? The law changes nothing, the gospel is the only thing that actually changes them? When they are crushed under sin's weight, do they really need to hear what they have done wrong? Probably not.

God says that he is "well pleased" with Jesus in the Aorist (a Greek verb tense) which is perhaps significant here. The aorist suggests that God is pleased with this moment, with this action of Jesus. This is not God speaking of his ongoing or eternal love for Jesus, but it is God approving of this singular event.

Law

1. I have a profound God problem, so deep I don't even have the ability to comprehend it. I cannot even adequately repent of my own sin.
2. Do I have a fundamental first article problem, a problem in admitting that I am God's creature, by my nature his servant, that the stuff of this life, even life itself, does not really belong to me? am I trying to take ownership of something that is actually God's?
3. Unable to comprehend my own problem, my tendency is to think that I am largely OK, a little cosmetic work around the edges and I will be just fine. Fix my eyes Jesus so I don't need glasses, touch up the gray hair, but leave me essentially unchanged.
4. Unchanged and unwilling to be changed, my life bears a miserable fruit of strife, pain, and finally death. I realize something is terribly wrong with me, but I am not really willing to open that door and stare it straight in the face. It is just too terrible to contemplate. The only way it will happen is when things totally fall apart for me and I have no other choice.
5. God is not really safe to be around. He tears open the heavens and has a way of showing up at inconvenient times. His prophets are not easy to get along with, they wear funny clothes and embarrass us. He says things we don't want to hear and cannot bear. When his gaze falls on us, we turn away. He can sort of see right through me. He just makes us uncomfortable with ourselves.

Gospel

1. Jesus has picked up my slack – my repentance is tepid and weak, it does not plumb the depths of my sin, so he has repented for me and the rest of this world. He has born the burden I am incapable of bearing even for myself. He has taken the heavy burden and carried it to the last.
2. God’s creative word did not stop on the first day of creation. He still is creating, he created on the day of my baptism and he creates every time I hear his word. I cannot of my own reason or strength believe, but he creates that faith.
3. Freed of the burden, raised to a new life in Christ, I am a different person. My problems go deep, but so does the solution of Christ. This is no pat on the head and a nice encouraging word. This is a heart transplant, a mind transplant, a death and resurrection. This is strong stuff Jesus does today, but it is the stuff I need done. An eternity without radical change is not heavenly, but an eternity remade by Christ is sweet indeed.
4. And that eternity does not start in the future but starts right now. freed of the burden of my sinful self, I can indeed live a different sort of life. Having undergone the radical surgery of Christ, the complete solution, the cure is accomplished. I need not fear opening the door of my soul to Jesus. In fact, there is nothing in there he does not already know about and for which he has not already died. The question is not whether he can deal with it, but I have thrown myself across that door to bar his entrance. He will not force the way, but stands there today, gently pleading that he might enter and fix all.
5. No, God is not safe, not for the old man, but he is good. It is the Holy Spirit which pours forth from the rent heaven, it is God’s voice which declares Jesus to be the Son, the one really able to carry that burden and accomplish this salvific task. God authorizes him to save the world today, and he does. It is not safe, but it is very good.

Sermon Ideas

1. What is Jesus doing there? (Gospel and Epistle: That the hearer would believe that Jesus has repented of his/her sins fully and completely, living the perfectly righteous life, meriting the favor of God, and giving that same favor to all who are united to him in faith.)

The question of Jesus’ presence in the line of sinners is the real vehicle of this sermon. Pose the question, it is a good question, especially when one has the answer. Jesus is there repenting of the world’s sins which have been laid on his shoulders. He is carrying them to a cross, to a sacrifice, to a death on behalf of all, including you and me. It is strange that the only perfect, righteous, and good man who ever lived is in line with sinners to repent. But it is good that he is there. He has taken up our sins, so he belongs there more than anyone else. He ought to be there, for his sinful burden is the aggregate sin of the whole world. Jesus bears the sins of the whole world for a lot longer than we

usually think about this, it doesn't start when he shouldered the weight of the cross, but it starts when he descends from his throne in humiliation to a woman's womb and a rude manger. God does not turn his back on him here, because he is obediently doing this. God's favor, his pleasure in Jesus, is that he is fulfilling the law which none of us could do.

God the Father speaks to Jesus here. He is well pleased with the race that Jesus runs and the course that he has pursued. He is pleased to find Jesus in this line doing what we could not. He is pleased to see Jesus shouldering the burden. He is pleased with the obedience which Jesus offers up to his Father (Hebrews 5:7-8). Our sin means he can never be pleased with our lives as they natively are. We have fallen from that state. But Jesus can hear the words which God has longed to speak to all of us.

The Gospel is always that in Christ those words are spoken to us and about us as well in our own baptism into Christ, the obedient Son of God. By being joined to him in baptism, into his death upon a cross, we have been united with Christ in the flesh, in reality. This is no pious wish, some dream, but a real and physical thing. Christ's obedience to the Father, the pleasing obedience, the real obedience of which we are incapable, that obedience has been given to us in Christ.

2. The Real Solution (Epistle and Gospel: That the hearer would believe that Jesus has come to utterly and completely transform his/her life by taking the burden of sin to himself and bestowing the righteousness of his life on him/her.)

It is hard to admit that we have a problem. The folks who work with addicts tell us that it is often the biggest step that an addict must make in order to begin the long road to recovery. Jesus today does something odd. He repents of sins. Whose sins? Your sins, my sins, the sins of the whole world. Why does he do that? He does that because we are not very good at repentance. You see, we have a terrible problem. We have a God problem. We like to think that we are largely OK, that our life may need some cleaning up around the edges, but that it is relatively sound. Like the modestly obese, we envision ourselves thin and think that with a little dieting we could be thin again. But we just don't get around to doing it. So we find Jesus in this line in which we belong. Though we might walk through it a thousand times we would still need to return. He is there because we cannot even get the repentance right. Our flaw, our corruption runs so deep that we cannot even say were sorry and mean it 100%. There is always that nasty old man clinging to the sin, regretting our penitent words even as we speak them. And so Jesus must bear that for us too. The disease is deep and so his solution therefore has to be radical and complete. There is no part of my life which does not need his redemption. That is why he stands in this line today and why he bears that cross on Good Friday. But there is more to this story. The Jesus who stood in that line of sinners for me, has died and risen to new life with me as well. He has empowered my life with his goodness now. The old wretch still would taint even my best deeds, but Jesus has redeemed them all.

Now, my whole life stands perfected by his sacrifice. The Devil himself can hurl his accusations at me, but it won't stick. I am made of Teflon now. My good deeds are truly good in Him. The world will point with that old man to the sin which still clings so effectively to me, and they will miss the real solution which is at work in my life all the while. It did not start with a decision on my part, or some act of my will or some proper thought of mine, but started when water and word introduced me to this solution, when I was a helpless sinner, probably unaware of what was even happening. That was the day that Christ took hold of me to work his solution to my problems. A work begun, a work in progress even today, and a work which he will finish on His day. Philippians 1:6

3. Be who you are (That the hearer would confess the reality of Christ in us, authentically living out the reality of Christ's presence in our lives.)

This sermon will confront head on a cultural sense that we need simply to express our real self and that means I can do whatever I want to do. That has led to a great deal of mischief in our world as folks have often gone off the rails in the name of simply being themselves. A trip through the grocery checkout and a look at the tabloids will likely be all you need to see that.

We want to proclaim another reality, however, the reality that Christ has come to live in us. He who kept the commandments perfectly and who gave himself in sacrifice for me and the whole world, that Jesus has come inside me. Great sacramental connection there. Jesus has come inside of us, not metaphorically, but really!

This reality gives authenticity to our good deeds, our repentance, and our service. This is not me living in response to some divine goodness, this is divine goodness living in me. My life in all its goodness is authentic because it is Christ in me.

Christians, be authentic – live out your Jesus!

4. Alive to God in Christ Jesus or Baptized into New Life (Epistle: That the Spirit of God would slay the old man in Baptismal remembrance and enervate the new man once more to live a new life of hope in Christ.)

This sermon might focus more specifically on vs 4 of the Epistle which speaks of being raised with Christ to walk in a newness of life. This sermon might simply ask why we repent. (See the notes at the end of the opening essay.) If Christ has won for us the salvation which is free and clear, graciously given to us, why should we be sorry for our sins? Why should we try to do better? Why should we do the good thing even when it is hard to do or expensive or unpopular? If Jesus really has done it all, and today we even see him repenting for us, why should we do any of these things?

The answer is not that we might earn something from God. We are not in that old buy and sell relationship which the old man understood so well. (John 5:24 – those who believe have passed from death to life). We do not repent so that we please him. We

repent because he has already accepted us. We repent because Jesus has come to live in our lives. The old man who had a God problem is drown in the waters of Baptism. Our problem is no longer a problem with God. We are made anew. We are the regenerate human whom God has raised up from the waters of Baptism, we are the heirs of eternal life. We don't have a God problem we need to fix.

We have a human problem now. Repenting, doing the good, living the life to which God calls us is not saving us or make us more saved, but it is living out that which God has already created in us. It is looking more like Jesus because Jesus is already here. It is simply becoming more and more the people we are by his creative word spoken at the waters of our baptism. We can easily be discouraged when we don't see this. But this text proclaims that Christ is empowering that new man. I will not be a new man by the force of my will or dint of my perseverance. Christ creates, Christ empowers, Christ makes this happen.

The preacher needs to remember that these words of Paul are addressed to the New Man, the regenerate person whom God has created/resurrected anew in baptism. In chapter 7 of Romans Paul takes up the issue of that old stinker who hangs on so tightly to us. He admits (7:27) that only Jesus can free him from this struggle. You cannot only address that new man. The Old Man will completely take advantage of such language and use it as a license to sin, the very problem Paul is addressing here. When we would use the gospel as a license to sin, we are simply not on God's wavelength, we are not in tune with him. We are in tune with the old man, and the old man is dying.

At the same time, the real power over that old man is only found in the Gospel which we here proclaim. The fact is we don't really look like that New Man, sometimes less than other times. But God's Word is Creative (Genesis 1!) The baptismal formulation is not just wishful thinking but it is the same creative voice ringing out in our lives. The new man does exist, even though we often find him hard to see.

The proclaimed word then has the power to enervate that new man who languishes too often under the control of that old stinker who clings too tightly to us. This text proclaims that we are connected to the very life/power of the universe. We have been united with Christ in his death and his resurrection. He has taken up residence in us.

Our obedience then is not some old economy of buy and sell, but it is the new economy of grace. Jesus is breaking out all over the place in our lives. The new man whom he created is showing up. (It would be really good if you had something in your community/congregation to point to at this juncture of the sermon!)

Now the old crusty who clings so tightly is no longer a matter of our discouragement and despair. I know that his fate was sealed on the day of my baptism. God, who began a good work in me (Philippians 1:6) will bring it to completion. The day comes, I count on it, I have hope, the day comes when only this new man shall be seen. I yearn for that day

and until then I strive for it. but I strive and yearn in hope. I shall not bring it about, but he will.

(This idea came from one of our regular Tuesday evening interlocutors. Here is Tom's prompt for this sermon:) I was looking at the Romans text with this thought in mind – That the hearer will know that in Christ our old self has died beyond the point of all return, and we have a new life of hope in Jesus. I wanted to work the sermon off of the dying to sin and why we die to sin (Baptism drowns the old Adam), and that because we are connected to Jesus in our Baptism we have new life in him. That is as far as I have gotten in putting an outline together. Just a thought to throw out there if the group is looking for another idea for a sermon.

5. I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth (OT, Psalm and Gospel: That the Spirit of God, hovering over the hearers and resident within them, would create in them the confident faith which rests in the loving embrace of the creator.)

When the preacher brings up the subject of creation, it can cause a little consternation on the part of the hearer. Are we just going to go back to that old fight between faith and science? I am weary of that fight; it just goes on and on and never seems to end. That is exactly not where I want this sermon to go. I think that is a dead end fight which distracts us from the real message of creation.

Christianity is not so much interested in how God made the world but that God made it. The entire discussion of the age of the earth and evolution really serves to mask, distract from, and obscure the much more important statement: God made it. If we think we have preached the Gospel by preaching against evolution we are foolish and poor preachers. We have missed the point that the creedal statement brings with it a number of critically important assertions. The first of these are law – the latter are Gospel.

- a. God owns it. The world is his, not mine. I may have a bank account and a house, but they are ultimately all part of the universe which God made. As its author and creator, God exercises the ultimate right of ownership. Not me.
- b. As owner, God gets to make the rules. If I should make something in my workshop, say a table, I get to say how it gets used. I can put flowers on it, I can eat off of it, I can appoint to it its purpose. God gets to make the rules for the world. I don't.
- c. As part of that creation I am obligated to adhere to those rules which he makes up. I may not like them, but that doesn't make them any less applicable to me.
- d. If the world does not do what God lays out for it to do, he is perfectly within his rights to prescribe consequences for that disobedience even to the point that he destroys it, utterly. There is no due process that we are owed. There is no escape

clause. There is no compensation for lost income because God has destroyed the universe. He made it, he owns it, he gets to make the rules and he gets to determine what happens if the rules are not kept. If I make a table and one leg is too short, I am perfectly within my rights to cut it up for firewood. The table does not get any say in the matter.

- e. God spoke his creation into being and the first recorded speech he makes about that creation is that it is “good.” God loves his creation. It is not a matter of any indifference to him what happens to it. The creation is important to him. Listen to the Psalmist today. God’s speaks not only the earthquake and the wind and the lightning, but also the deer panting in labor in the forest as the fawn is born. God pays great attention to detail.
- f. The same Word which spoke the creation has united itself to the creation. Jesus did not skim across the top of the creation, breathing only the pure and upper airs, but he dove to the very bottom of the creation. We see him today standing in line with sinners. We will see him bearing this creation’s rebellion to a cruel hill where he will suffer and die a miserable death. He has become one with this dying, rebellious world.
- g. And now that word is our judge who will mete out justice on the basis of his sacrifice. The formulators of the creed made a tremendous leap when they located the judgment in the second and not the first Article of the Creed. Our faith holds that though God has the right to judge, he first redeems and then the judgment.

Conclude the sermon with the Psalm.