

### SERVANT'S ENTRANCE

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” Thus begins the first of Isaiah’s four servant songs. Who is this servant of God? Perhaps we are quick to answer Jesus. The prophet leaves it to us to figure out, but in Isaiah 49 we read: “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” Are we not also called to serve God? Does that not begin when we are baptized?

Today, this first Sunday after the Epiphany, we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. From the earliest days of the church, this winter festival was second only to the spring feast of Easter. For hundreds of years the church has celebrated this feast day before Christmas ever came to its own. In fact, this day is Christmas at the River Jordan, Jesus’ birth in the waters as the Son of God. What does this mean?

That’s always a good question to ask of the Bible: What does this mean? It’s a good Lutheran question.

Before Jesus begins his public ministry, before the 40 days in the wilderness where his mission is first put to the test, before he calls disciples to follow, he goes to the river to be baptized by John. We read that John tries to prevent Jesus, but Jesus insists, thus setting an example for us all. Baptism is our public birth as sons and daughters of God, as members of the body of Christ, the community called the church. Baptism begins our cross and resurrection journey. Baptism is the servant’s entrance into God’s reign.

Today, the texts remind us of our servanthood in Christ—our role, calling, purpose. Yes, Isaiah may have had in mind Israel as the principal servant of God, but we, through Christ, are heirs of Israel, and thus we are God’s servants. We, with the gospelers of the New Testament, now see Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s servant songs, and so, since we are baptized in Jesus, into the body of Christ, his servanthood is now ours. We have passed through the waters, through the servant’s entrance, into the here-now-and-forever life of the kingdom of God.

As God says of Jesus so God says of us, “Behold my servant, my Beloved, in whom my soul delights.” We have passed through the waters and we now carry Christ’s towel and basin to serve the world in the love of Christ. Jesus says to us:

I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet; you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done. . . . I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this the world will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.

Welcome to the Way of Jesus! Welcome to the way of justice and peace, of following Jesus’ example, bringing forth justice to the nations, to the weak and meek, the poor and broken-hearted. In Jesus’ name we are faithfully to bring forth justice. Tracing back to Israel of old, we are God’s living covenant for the healing of the whole world.

Peter was slow to catch on, but he finally learned that God shows no partiality, but reaches out to welcome those the world shames, those called ‘dirty’ and of no account. This is the Way of Jesus, our calling. In and through Holy Baptism we take the servant’s entrance into the reign of Christ, to walk in the Way of Jesus, to live, worship and serve together as the living body of Christ for the sake of the world. “I give you as a light to the nations,” God says, “so that my healing may reach to the ends of the earth.” Whew!

Do we imagine that baptism is simply a religious ritual to get our souls into heaven? What do we think? Again, we ask, "What does it mean?"

I was the young associate. The phone call from someone unknown with a query about baptizing her baby was given to me. Gramma was coming to town, so in conjunction with her visit mom and dad wanted to get the baby baptized. A little private ceremony was what they wanted, at their convenience. I invited the woman and her husband to come in to the church office, so I could meet them and meet with them and we could talk about baptism. No. They didn't want to come in to talk. They just wanted a date to get the kid "done." After explaining that I could not in good conscience dispense baptism like that, the woman handed me off to her husband, who was very upset with me. After explaining to him that I appreciate their desire to have their child baptized, but I need to meet with them first, he said to me, "You're sending my child to hell." Hmm? What do you think? Baptism is a gift of God's grace. Is God's grace cheap or is it costly grace? Just to follow up on the story. After the man hung up on me, I decided to write an article for the Lutheran Standard. After the article was published, a neighboring Lutheran pastor, Paul Johnsen, with whom I was visiting, told me this. In his years at Grace Lutheran, Huntington Beach, he had quite a number of young couples come in to get the kid done. His meeting with them to talk about baptizing the child was usually the first time he met each couple. He would meet with them, talk about the meaning of baptism, the costly gift of God's grace, and he would have them look particularly at these words:

In Christian love you present your child for Holy Baptism. You should, therefore, faithfully bring her to the services of God's house, teach her the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, and, as she grows in years, you should place in her hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for her instruction in the Christian faith, that, living in the covenant of her Baptism and in communion with the Church, she may lead a godly life until the day of Jesus Christ. Do you promise to fulfill these obligations?

Only after the parents said they would live up to these responsibilities did Pastor Johnsen consent to baptize their child. He told me he had kept track of 100 such couples, and he asked me to guess of those 100 how many did he ever see again in church after their child was baptized. I was rather negative and guessed only two. He said zero. Never did he see them again in church.

"I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." Our baptism ought not be taken for granted. We are here to set people free, free from the powers that bind and abuse, that impoverish and imprison, tyrannize and oppress, that shame and ridicule. What are our tools, our weapons if you will? The servant's towel and basin. The baptism candle, reminding us that we are to shine with the light of Christ. The Word!—not merely the printed word, but the Living Word who is Christ!

As God opened the heavens at the baptism of Jesus and the Spirit of God descended on Jesus like a dove, so through the ministry of the church God opens the heavens so that God's Spirit may descend in mercy and power, in healing and restoration. When nation wars against nation and people suffer, through us God would open wide the heavens to bring peace and reconciliation. When people suffer and die, in floods or earthquakes, of malaria or HIV/AIDS, God would open wide the heavens, that we servants of God may shine the light of God's love.

Today, as we come to the servant's meal, let us not take for granted but remember and affirm our baptism, the servant's entrance into the life and mission of the church—the body of Christ.

**To God Alone Be Glory.**

**Amen.**