

Baptism of Our Lord

When I was in High School we had a group of college students from Concordia University in Seward Nebraska that came and organized a day camp for the kids in the neighborhood. I remember one year the theme of the day camp was: "God keeps his promises." And we talked about the Noah and his family and how God made a promise to him that he'll be with him and protect him despite the terrifying flood. And then we talked about how God promised not to ever again destroy every living creature. And how he gave a sign of a rainbow for us to remember his promise.

See this day camp wouldn't be much different from other day camps these kids went to. But I remember that this theme was different, it spoke to some of these kids directly. For many of them were Roma kids, they are the poorest minority in Slovakia, many of these kids were from broken families, many of their parents were unemployed, addicted to alcohol or drugs, or in prison. These kids heard in their lives many empty promises. In fact many of them lost hope that there is someone who would keep a promise given to them.

And so it was a very hard job to explain to them that there is God who loves them, who gave them a promise of a new and different life in Jesus Christ and that this God will keep his promise no matter what. It was challenging to explain to them the power of God's promise but at the same time it was one of the most rewarding day camps I ever participated in. For you could see the change in these kids once they realized that they're loved by God, that they're loved by these crazy American college kids who flew across the world to share this message of God's hope and love with them. "God keeps his promises," it was a message worth sharing.

When I read today's Gospel reading about the baptism of Jesus, these memories came back to life. For there is a great connection between God's promise to Noah and his family and the promises that are given to us in our baptism. I love to sit down with families prior to the baptism of their children and talk about what does it really mean to be baptized. Our order of baptism pretty much explains what is happening, but those of you who have had your children baptized lately probably remember how hard it is sometimes to concentrate on the words that are spoken to you, for you are balancing an infant in your arms.

And that's why it is good not only for the parents to sit down and talk about the meaning and power of baptism but it is good for all of us to talk about what exactly are the promises given to us as the water is poured upon us and those magical words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit" mean.

People coming to have their kids baptized have many different ideas about what does the baptism mean. And so as we sit down with parents the first thing that I stress out is that baptism is not some kind of insurance of God's salvation that you're getting for your children through bringing them to be baptized. Often times we have this kind of misconception. We view baptism as a onetime magical ceremony that once it's done, it can be put away together with the baptismal certificate.

But that's not what the baptism is about. Baptism is not a life insurance. What I love to use to describe the baptism is that wonderful word PROMISE. Baptism is a promise. And as Martin Luther says in his Small Catechism: In baptism God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe what he has promised. To all who believe what he has promised.

God is giving us an incredible promise as he speaks to those who are baptized the same words he spoke when our Lord Jesus was baptized: "You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter, I love you so much that I'm willing to promise you something this day. And then our God continues and says: I give you a promise of forgiveness of all of your sins. I give you a promise of deliverance from death and the devil; I give you a promise of everlasting salvation. These promises are yours. I will keep them. And no one will ever take them away from you... as long as you believe in them. As long as you'll make them your own.

And see this is why baptism is not an insurance. Insurance can be bought, someone can purchase it for you, put it away in a safe place and when something happens it just kicks in. See baptism is about a relationship. It's about a beginning of a journey. It is about a promise of God and our trust in this promise. And see the good news is that that promise once given to us when we were baptized is still there, no matter what is going on in our lives, no matter how far we walked away from it, even if our parents or sponsors didn't raise us in faith, that does not erase the promise of God. The promise was given and it stands firm. And the only way this promise

might lose its power is when we deny it in our own lives. If we decide to say, no I don't believe. If we decide that we're too unworthy of such an incredible promise. Or if we say, I don't need such promise. (pause)

But you might ask yourself, why would someone want to do that? Well that's a good question. For the truth is that there are millions of Christians out there who have long time ago forgotten about the promise given to them by their God. And often times we're among them. For on regular bases we struggle with so much in our lives that we often time forget that we're loved, that we're watched after, that we were simply given a promise of something much better that what we're experiencing now.

See in today's reading we hear about the crowds that came to be baptized, we read about how they were filled with expectations, they were looking for something better. They were looking for someone to give them a new direction a new beginning. They were looking for someone to save them, the Messiah. But at the same time they were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the one. And then John said: "I baptize you with water; but one who comes is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

John was talking about Jesus who was baptized by John and given the same promise of God's love and presence and then started his magnificent ministry, calling his disciples, preaching and teaching the word of God, healing the sick and brokenhearted, bringing justice and peace among his followers, forgiving sins and raising from the dead. (pause) Jesus came to John to be baptized and the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him and God said: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

See that something spectacular is happening here. God is saying in front of the whole world that he is present among his people in this man Jesus. God is saying that he is pleased with all the people through this man Jesus. And God is saying that he will gather all his children who believe in his promises through this man Jesus. These are the promises spoken to all of us as we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. As the water is poured upon us and the word is spoken and the Holy Spirit starts His work in our hearts, God is saying:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” Is there a better promise that can be given to us? I believe there isn't.

The promise of Baptism, God's love poured upon us through the living water and word. Our God taking an ownership over us. If we know that is what is promised to us, why wouldn't we each day of our lives remind ourselves of this gift? If we know that this is what is promised to our children as we bring them to be baptized, why wouldn't we each day remind them of this gift? There are people that travel across the world just to share this message of God's promise.

As I said, baptism is not an insurance, it's a promise of love, it's a beginning of a new journey of faith with our God, and Lord Jesus Christ, trust and believing that he saved us, called us by name and that nothing in this world will be able to separate us from his love, for we are his baptized children.

Amen