

Sermon 2010 Baptism of Our Lord
Text: Isaiah 43:1-7
Theme: "Precious in His Eyes"

Like most people, I once understood Christianity as a method of achieving salvation. I was always Lutheran, so I would throw in the words Grace and Law and Gospel. If you use those three words, whatever you say is bound to sound Lutheran. But I really was a closet Methodist because I had a method for salvation.

All you have to do is more good stuff than bad stuff and God will take care of the rest. I was proud of all the good stuff I did and I have to admit that I looked down on those whom I thought did more bad stuff than me. Even into my early ministry I was still using my method for salvation. I would say something like, "we are saved by grace through faith," but I understood that to mean that we, who have mastered the method, are saved by grace through faith. I mean crass sinners couldn't be saved, right? And you had to be on guard in your congregation to make sure that all sinners were getting caught and disciplined less they lose their salvation.

I have found that I am no different from the majority of you. How many times have I heard you say things that drip with works righteousness?

“Are you saved?”

“Well, I hope so. I try to do the right thing. I give as much as I can to the church. I help the less fortunate. I’m better than that guy.” Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah de da blah, blah, blah.... When are we ever going to get it? Anything good we do does not come from us but from God working through us. You are utterly and completely incapable of a good work without God working through you! You alone are only capable of sin and evil. Period. And some of you say,

“Well yeah Pastor, but what about my Muslim neighbor? Or my Jewish neighbor? They do good things and they don’t believe the same as we do. They help the poor and are kind to children and the elderly and give to charity. What about them?”

Of course they do good things for society. Do you think that God is unable to work through them? God can work through any of his creation to accomplish anything he wants to accomplish – but that has nothing more to do with their salvation than our works have to with

our salvation. When are we going to get it? Salvation and works are two separate things. While Salvation effects works, it is in no way based on works. We know that the closer your relationship with God, the more works you will do for the right reasons (that is true good works that flow from your relationship with God and are truly sacrificial works and not works that get you something in return). And conversely, the more distant you are from God the fewer true works you will do.

So, having said all that, all of us Methodists might want to pay close attention to the Old Testament reading for today. God says this.

First, he is the God who created you. That gives him a special relationship with us right from the start. My mother used to say, "I brought you into this world and I can take you out!" My brothers and I who were all a foot taller and a 100 lbs heavier than she recognized that she was playing the creator card and we generally would do what she said, not because we were physically afraid of her but because she had a unique relationship with us as the one who was our mother.

God goes on to say, Fear not! You are mine. Will there we trial? Yes. There is water to pass through and fire to pass through but you

will not be destroyed. God's got our backs. Why? Because we are so good? Because we have been pleasing in his sight? NO! Because he created us and he bought us back when we sold ourselves to Satan. He gave his own son in exchange for us and he surely isn't going to give up now. God says,

"Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life." He is referencing the exile from Egypt and the return of the conquered from Babylon but both of those point to Christ where God would make the ultimate exchange for us of his son on a cross for us.

We celebrate Jesus' Baptism today because in being baptized he fulfilled the law for us as a man. Baptized as a human being, he fully stepped into our shoes and became the exchange for us – the prize Satan would take to hell in return for the release of all the other hostages. On Wednesday, a precious few of us gathered to celebrate a great feast day of the Church – the day Gentiles, our ancestors, worshipped the Christ child, thus showing that he had come not just for the Jews but for all people. Today we celebrate the moment he

fully stepped into our shoes and began the process of exchanging himself for us which would culminate on the cross.

So we are precious to God not because of anything we do but because he has exchanged his son for us. As our faith grows and as we grow closer to God, the amazing sacrifice he made for us will motivate us to live lives that are more consistent with Him, but the exchange has already been made and we have received the benefit of that exchange in our Baptisms and through the Word. It's done.

There is no method for salvation and the sooner we quit trying to find one, the happier we will be. Salvation is a gift that has been given to us – even if we didn't ask for it. We are the precious children of God and our value is not based on us but on God. Our growth is not to better apprehend our salvation – we already have that. Growth for us is concerned primarily with understanding, believing and using the impact on our lives that salvation makes. Salvation is a gift that takes years to unwrap and even the most faithful among us has much to unwrap yet. AMEN.