

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JANUARY 9, 2011

BAPTISM OF CHRIST SUNDAY

Scriptures: Psalm 29; Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17; Acts 10: 34-43

BRANDED BY BAPTISM

There is the story of the young boy who had never been in a church before. It was the day of his baby cousin's baptism. The boy seemed very agitated at all that he saw and heard. His mother whispered to him to sit still. But the boy whispered back that he was afraid of the woman who was the pastor. His mother asked him why. "Well," he replied, "Why is she wearing her fancy bathrobe? Didn't she get up in time this morning?" His mother tried to quietly explain that ministers often wear special robes during the church service and it was not a bathrobe.

The boy then said that he was still afraid of the pastor, and his embarrassed mother told him there was no reason to be afraid of her. But the boy insisted. He said, "Then why did she pass out those dishes so those men could collect money from everyone? People must really be scared of her if they will give her all their money." The mother told her boy to be quiet and she would explain about the offering when they got home.

Right then, as the pastor was baptizing his little cousin, the boy just could not keep quiet a minute longer. He cried out in a loud voice, "That proves it. Now she's trying to drown the baby!"

One evening the New Testament professor from Princeton Seminary visited a high school youth group. After the professor finished speaking about the significance of Christ's baptism as a revelation of God's presence in Jesus, a high-schooler said without looking up, "That ain't what it means." Glad that the student had been listening enough to disagree, the professor asked,

"What do you think it means?" "The story says that the heavens were opened, right?" "Right." "The heavens were opened and the Spirit of God came down, right?" "That's right."

The boy finally looked up and leaned forward, saying, "It means that God is on the loose in the world. And that's dangerous."

[The professor agreed, thinking:] After his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness, and it was dangerous. Jesus taught in the temples, and it was dangerous. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, and it was dangerous. Jesus confronted the authorities and turned over the tables of the money-changers, and it was dangerous.¹

I ask you this morning if you have followed Jesus into any dangerous territory since your baptism? Many of us were baptized when we were very young, so our adventure into danger might have started at a much later time. The fact remains, God is on the loose in our world and it can be dangerous because God, especially in the person of Jesus Christ is not always very popular. Christianity in general is not very popular. God gets in the way of people and what they want. God can make people feel guilty and take away all their fun. Or at least that's the way many people think.

According to the Bible and tradition, we are supposed to be made different by our baptism. It is as if we are defined by it, branded by it. Cattle on huge ranches in western states are branded to identify one man's cows from another man's. One rancher's cattle may bear the brand Bar X and show a bar with the figure of an X made over it. Another family's cows might bear the brand Lazy R which shows the letter R lying on its side. Each cow is then known as belonging to its rightful owner.

¹Chambers, Daniel D., from *The Text this Week*, "Sermon Fodder," Internet source for January 9, 2011.

When we are baptized, we are not branded by an iron or even tattooed, but we are marked as surely as if we were. We are branded by God because of Jesus Christ and we are given the very Spirit of the Lord. The Sacrament of Baptism is as the word implies a **sacred** rite. When we are baptized, the minister baptizes us by name identifying who we are in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We are then declared to be a child of God, a disciple of Christ, and a member of the church universal. Just as the voice of God which came from heaven when Jesus was baptized by John, identified him as God's own Son, so we are identified at the time of our baptism.

When you become a member of the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, the 4-H club, the Rotary, the Lions, the Realtors Association, a union, or even a church it means something. You **are** a Boy Scout, you **are** a 4-H girl, you **are** a realtor, or whatever. So, the question we must ask ourselves today is, "As people who have been baptized, how are we identified to the rest of the world?" How are we identified to other people? We have been branded by our baptism for a reason. We are meant to proclaim who we are. You are branded, so I ask you—"How do you identify yourself?" Are you being who you say you are?

If you are a Christian, then your identity should be clear, but not because you wear a cross or a tee shirt with a Christian message. In fact, much as I hate to say it, sometimes it is the person who makes a lot of noise about his faith who has the least Christian character of all. This week I was told the story of a man who bought a car for his family from a used car dealer who proclaimed loudly in his advertising that he was a Christian. The car turned out to not be as it was advertised. It was a piece of junk for which the buyer was going to have to make payments for a long time. The dealer refused to make good on his promise that the car was in good running condition. Not only did the man get taken in by a disreputable car dealer— he got taken in by

someone who said that he ran his business in the name of Christ!

Our baptism should brand us as men and women who stand out because of the way we live our lives, and we should live our lives rightly modeling ourselves on the life of our Savior. Leading our lives in a Christ-like way may well lead us into danger. It may be exhausting, and it may seem a thankless way to live. But it can also be a life of happiness and contentment, knowing that such a life is pleasing to God. Leading a Christ-like life will make you stand out. You will not have to advertise your faith on a billboard or on your shirt. The evidence of what is in your heart will be lived out in you day by day, and it will always be a life of righteousness and not evil.

In the movie *Godfather 2*, there is a riveting scene in which Michael Corleone played by Al Pacino, stands as godfather for the baptism of his sister's baby. The words of the order of service in that Roman Catholic cathedral in the movie are nearly the same as the words of ritual which we use for baptism. The priest began the baptism service with the ritual spoken in Latin. His words seem to echo out through the huge old cathedral, and as the we listen to the priest's words we see assassins preparing their guns for execution. The scene itself is a dark, dark church, and dark rooms where guns are made ready.

The priest asks the questions: "Do you renounce Satan?"

Michael Corleone, the godfather replies "I do renounce him."

"And all his works?"

"I do renounce them."

"And all his pomps?"

"I do renounce them."

As he makes all these statements we begin to see the assassins at work, as five different heads of crime families are executed.

Do you believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth?" Michael Corleone answers, "I do believe."

"Do you believe in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord?"

The godfather answers, "I do believe."

"Do you believe in the Holy Ghost?" The godfather answers, "I do believe."

While he is answering these questions men are being shot with big impressive-looking guns. One, I think it is the one called Moe Green is shot in the eye right through his glasses as he lies on a massage table. The priest asks Michael who is speaking for the baby, "Michael, will you be baptized? And Michael, who has already been baptized himself—most likely as an infant— answers for the child, saying, "I will be baptized." So, the child, who is named Michael also, is baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The whole family group then moves out to the front steps of the church, and someone comes to whisper in Michael Corleone's ear reporting on the work of the hit men.

The movie gives a stark contrast between good and evil. It reveals the truth that a show of religious piety, such as being in church on the right occasions, is not the same as a life lived for Christ. Michael Corleone denounced the identity given to him in his baptism. Some people turn away from their baptism and are branded by other things in life. Michael Corleone was branded and lived as "The Godfather," chief of the mob. Each person has a choice. Do you want to be branded by your baptism, or by something else? Do you really want to be who you say you are?

The prophet Isaiah, in the passage I read a few minutes ago, spoke about the coming Messiah and what he would do. Jesus was identified by God and given his work well before the prophecy was fulfilled and Jesus walked on this earth. I like what Isaiah says about Jesus: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." I don't know about you my friends, but I sometimes feel like that

bruised reed. Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like nothing is going right no matter how hard you try? Life seems to bear down on you, too much sad stuff, too much to do, too much feeling down in the dumps as they say. If you are that bruised reed, remember that you have been branded and identified by God. By the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, you will not be broken!

Perhaps, you feel like “a smoldering wick.” Do you ever feel as if you are too old, too sick, too tired of life to want to go on? What’s the use? Do you wonder why you are still here if you cannot do anything to help others or to make a difference? Do you see yourself as having no value? If you are that smoldering wick, remember that you have been branded and identified by God. By the grace of our Lord Jesus, you will not be snuffed out!

Living as a Christian, branded by our baptism, consists of a daily walk with the One who said that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. On that daily walk we come face to face with difficulties. In the next weeks before the beginning of Lent, I will be talking to you about how we can live in a Christ-like way even when life is hard. Today I wanted us to consider the idea of being who we say we are because of our baptism. Next Sunday my message is titled “Learning to Let Go and Let God.” The Bible reference will be from John 1: 29-42. During this season of what is called “Ordinary Time,” let us strengthen our resolve to live as Christians in an unchristian world, branded and identified by Jesus Christ. Amen.