

1st after Epiphany  
Milwaukee 1/9/72

"CHANGE THE WORLD"

WRIT - WFWO

1/16/72

Romans 12:1-2

"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to ~~this~~ this world (or as J.B. Phillips puts it - Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold) but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Dear Christian Friends - IT IS NOT LONG SINCE WE LEFT THE MANGER-SIDE OF CHRIST, where we witnessed the birth of A MAGNIFICENT SAVIOR, - where we knelt with the shepherds who came in faith to discover what the GLORIOUS GLAD TIDINGS meant for their lives - we joined the THREE KINGS in their pilgrimage as they brought their gifts and FELL DOWN AND WORSHIPPED HIM - and as a result of our experience, WE JOINED IN GLORIFYING AND PRAISING GOD FOR ALL THAT HE HAD DONE!

WHAT NEXT? That's right - what next? Could it really be true that anyone should have experienced this magnificent event, which has changed the course of all human history, AND THEN BE THE SAME AS HE WAS BEFORE?

Could it really be true that, after having knelt before the KING OF KINGS and LORD OF LORDS, we should return to our homes and our places of work and of business and LET THE WORLD SQUEEZE US INTO ITS OWN MOLD?

Could it really be true, that having witnessed the POWER OF GOD at work in the world of men, WE SHOULD NOT USE THAT POWER to transform the life of men?

THESE THINGS DO HAPPEN in spite of THE GIFT THAT GOD HAS GIVEN - you know it, and I know it. All that is left is for us TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THESE

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THINGS ARE TRUE - and then determine either THAT THIS IS THE WAY WE WANT IT TO BE, or else, if it is not, THEN TO DETERMINE WHAT WE ARE GOING TO DO ABOUT IT!

I'M ANGRY THIS MORNING - because I am convinced that there are too many of us (and by that I mean ALL OF GOD'S CHILDREN) who are satisfied to let life be CAST IN THE MOLD OF THE WORLD - and we don't care enough about the conditions that we observe that we will do anything about it!

I'd like to drive around the city of Milwaukee and throw a bomb into every house that provides sub-human living conditions for its inhabitants.

Let me tell you why I feel that way. An opportunity came to us TO SALVAGE SOME FURNITURE and APPLIANCES from a building that is due to be torn down beginning tomorrow. One of our members who works for the firm who bought the building THOUGHT OF THE LUTHERAN SOCIAL ACTION CONFERENCE and asked me to see if there was anything that I thought people could use.

I believed there was - so I rented a truck and gathered two of my sons and 2 nephews and we did some hauling for a few hours. We salvaged some usable articles, I believe, and perhaps could have even gotten more, except I had all that I could take. I was sick - sick at heart - and sick to my stomach at the kind of SUB-HUMAN LIVING CONDITIONS THAT I SAW, where people had been obliged to live in such filth - and with such little protection from the elements - and with such little concern on the part of the owners, who charge 60 or 70 or 80 dollars a month for their filthy, vermin-ridden dwellings.

And then I got to thinking about it - and I know that this is not the worst that exists - and I got even sicker.

Right next door to us - and in back of our church there are conditions that are just as bad - and

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perhaps even worse. About a month ago an article appeared in the Milwaukee Sentinel, written by an investigative reporter, about these buildings, which are owned by a woman who has held several official positions in the city, and her brother, who is an absentee landlord.

Some months ago one of the buildings was condemned as "unfit for human occupancy," because it had 195 code violations, and was to have been vacated by the middle of July. But a rather strange thing happened - the inspector, who had condemned it, was transferred to another part of the city - and another inspector permitted it to be approved for occupancy with only a few minor improvements.

THERE ARE A LOT THAT ARE WORSE THAN THESE - and no-one even seems to care. Yes - I'd like to throw some bombs - but THEN WHERE WOULD THEY LIVE?

There are those in CITY GOVERNMENT and elsewhere - sometimes called FAT CATS by their critics, who could do something about conditions like these, but they don't!

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT? It isn't long until another election. I suggest that we carefully scrutinize the candidates - meet with them and ask them questions - secure some commitments from them - and make some changes, so that there is at least some hope of changing the conditions under which people must live - and some hope of providing them with the resources for enjoying life.

As people who have experienced what changes God has brought about in our lives - as people who have experienced the REBIRTH OF HOPE in life - we cannot ignore the least of our brothers.

We are forced, or should be forced to examine the welfare system, the courts, reformatories and prisons, and every institution of society that affects the human condition - and we should bring pressure to bear - we should organize - we should "storm city hall" if we must.

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There are other circumstances of life that need our attention - but I can mention only a few - I hope that you will find others.

In Northern Ireland recently a man was asked if he would look after an animal made homeless by the riots. He would CERTAINLY GIVE A DOG A HOME, he replied, but he would have to be sure that it did not come from Ballymurphy, the Catholic area of Belfast, where there has been so much violence.

In a society where a man will not give a dog a home if it comes from the wrong side of the community, THE ORDINARY VALUES OF LIFE HAVE BECOME DEBASED. There is in our world a brutalization of life, which is unbelievable.

Belfast, we are told, has a brutality of its own. The rubble, the barbed wire, the gaping windows, the hulks of pubs, the shattered homes, the armored cars, the explosions, the death notices in newspapers, the bloodstains, the funerals and the smell of violence are infinitely depressing.

Depression turns to despair, and despair hardens to cynicism or seeks refuge in resignation. And so all too often today, DEATH ITSELF SEEMS TO BE LESS IMPORTANT THAN THE RELIGION OF THE PERSON WHO HAS DIED.

This is one illustration out of many that could be given - but HOW IN GOD'S NAME can the CHRISTIAN WORLD rest easy and be content in the JOY and HOPE it has found in ITS SAVIOR -

*physicians, lawyers, professors*  
- WHEN BRUTAL, senseless, unprovoked bayonetting of innocent people occurs in the Indian-Pakistani crisis. THIS - after the war was supposedly over - in retaliation - or retribution - or what? *in case they should cause trouble*  
The philosophy of an eye for an eye has no place alongside our philosophy of life as Christians.

Or - how can we rest easy WHEN BOMBING OF HOMES AND VILLAGES OCCURS in North Vietnam - and destruction is rained down upon the innocent victims of

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a world which has been depraved by men.

- or HOW CAN WE REST EASY when in our own city two children are destroyed by fire - probably again the victims of a system which could not or would not provide safe housing, or adequate income - or conditions which would safeguard instead of destroying human life.

DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE - if the person who dies is black or white- Catholic or Protestant - Indian or Pakistani - American or Vietnamese? Have we grown so gross that WE NO LONGER VALUE HUMAN LIFE?

I do get angry - I get angry when I talk about these kinds of things and people tell me that I should preach the Gospel.

If preaching the Gospel means that I SHOULD BE CONTENT TO SIT IN A BEAUTIFUL HOUSE OF WORSHIP and talk about LOVE and FORGIVENESS and COMPASSION and UNDERSTANDING - and KINDNESS - and all of the other so-called CHRISTIAN VIRTUES and do nothing about the man who suffers under conditions which are SUB-HUMAN - or which are INHUMAN - or which are destructive of every HUMAN VALUE - or which isn't concerned as long as the person who suffers or dies ISN'T ONE OF US - or ONE OF OUR KIND - THEN I WANT NOTHING TO DO WITH THAT GOSPEL.

It is nothing - and it means nothing for me or for the world in which I live.

What Paul is telling us is this - HAVING EXPERIENCED THE MERCIES OF GOD YOURSELF - YOU SHOULD NOT BE FASHIONED IN THE MOLD OF THE PRESENT AGE OR STATE OF THINGS.

Christians are to represent a contrast to those who are limited and bound to worldly tastes, aspirations and sympathies. HAVING BEEN CHANGED - they are to bring about change - whether it be PHYSICAL or SPIRITUAL or what have you.

If this is not true, then Paul would conclude -

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YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THIS GOSPEL THAT YOU PROFESS TO BELIEVE - and I would heartily agree with him.

IF THE GOSPEL TELLS ME ANYTHING - it tells me that the LOVE OF WHICH IT SPEAKS is not an abstract thing - IT HAS REFERENCE TO THE LIVING OF LIFE.

The Church - and INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIANS are faced with the problem today of GIVING AN EFFECTIVE WITNESS - of transforming the world - of being of service in the manner and spirit of Christ - and that does not mean JUST SWEET JESUS' TALK!

To put it in the words of Stephen Rose, who wrote in an introduction to a series of essays, entitled "WHO'S KILLING THE CHURCH?", he says -

"Christians must hear the voice of one God calling them to work together in the streets and alleys, factories and offices, hospitals and legislative offices of a world in need of sacrificial service and dedicated commitment."

Those can be just PIOUS SOUNDING PHRASES - or it can be made to have REAL MUSCLE - but it depends on what we want to make of it.

IT IS TIME, I believe, that we launch out in some new areas of activity. REDEEMER CHURCH has not ever shrunk away from challenges in its 81 years of history -

I THINK THAT WE COULD START THINGS HAPPENING - and that we can find a way WITH THE POWER OF GOD AT WORK IN AND THROUGH US to transform the world in which we live.

Amen.

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD (Epiphany I)  
Luth. Church of the Master - Troy  
Jan. 12, 1975

"WHAT'S OUR LINE?"

"As soon as he was baptized, Jesus came up out of the water. Then heaven opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and lighting on him. And then a voice said from heaven, 'This is my own dear Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" Matt. 3:16-17

In 1972, the LCA Convention commissioned the church to do a study called "Exploration in Faith." The purpose was to determine how people in our church affirm their faith -- how do they think about it and how do they practice it.

Local congregations were asked to participate through small group studies. The results indicate that three distinct ways of affirming faith exist among Lutherans.

The first is represented by Joe & Mary Bell. These people put great emphasis upon the supernatural and in securing "a decision for Christ." They believe that religion has little to do with the world -- their interest and faith-life is dominated by "next world thinking." The Bells represent 15% of reported thinking in our church.

Then there's Fran & Les Woods. They grew up in the church - but today question traditional beliefs. For them, disease is cured by science; food production is increased by research, not prayers. Instead of going to church, They have joined a community organization which they feel is doing a lot more for the suffering of the world. 28% of LCA members fell into this category.

But Joe & Jenny Johnson represent the majority of LCA members. They live in a Sunday world and a Monday world. Most Sundays they go to

church and enjoy it. They find their favorite hymns and favorite friends there. Holy Communion means a lot to them, so does Easter. They truly believe in Christ.

On Mondays, however, Joe is the managing accountant for a small plant; and Jenny teaches biology. Jenny is a member of the teacher's union; and Joe represents the office at political functions. They believe in getting involved, but they don't know how to get involved as Christians.

Their problem is getting their Sunday and Monday worlds together. They can't find Monday words to explain such things as redemption. They'd rather invite their friends to a church picnic than to worship. What Jenny teaches in biology class seems out of place in church school; and what she teaches in church school seems out of place in biology.

Frankly, say the Johnsons, they believe if Kissinger doesn't bring peace, it's not going to be brought by the congregation's general prayer. And if Ford doesn't solve the economic crisis, it won't be solved.

The Johnsons would desperately like to get their two worlds together, but they can't find the link. They want to know - What's Our Line? as an everyday Christian. How can we be in the world and not of the world?

The Bells and the Woods no longer ask this question - both these types have dropped out. The Bells live in a supernatural world -- faith has no relationship to life. The Woods live completely in a secular world - faith has been rejected from life.

But the Johnsons are still struggling to relate faith to life. To bring the Sunday and Monday worlds into contact. I think most of us are like them.

We put Christ in heaven on Sunday, but we don't know how to recognize him in a brother or sister on Monday. We have difficulty moving from worship to service -- from the altar to the market place.

Other times - we see Christ in a brother or sister, but we don't see him any longer on Sundays. Here we need help in moving from the earth below to heaven above.

In essence, the Johnsons - and many ~~others~~ Lutherans with them - suffer from the problem of "evangelical overkill" -- they know ~~all~~ the right words - doctrines - pious language; but they don't know how to apply language to living relationships.

The LCA study came up with the same answer that Jesus gave John in today's gospel -- the only answer to a Christian's identity crisis is the baptismal font. There God assures me that I'm not a Mid-westerner -- I'm not a pastor -- I'm not a Caucasian -- I'm not an American. I AM a child of God for whom Christ died and in whom the Spirit lives.

Let's say that together: "I am a child of God, for whom Christ died and in whom the Spirit lives."

That's your baptismal identity and mine -- it makes us ONE with Christ- with God - with each other. Jesus himself desired to be baptized -- TO COMPLETELY IDENTIFY WITH OUR SINFUL NATURE -- that way, we can be completely one with him.

What does this mean specifically?

First, it means that <sup>we all</sup> ~~we~~ are not only tied to this moment of fleeting history. When we say, "we have been baptized!" it means that God has tied our personal destiny together with the destiny of the universe. It means that God is saying: "You matter, regardless of how

unlovable you have been. God desires to unite all things in him -- you and I matter if that is going to take place.

The powers of this world cannot take that away from us. They can take our jobs - our possessions - our loved ones -- but they cannot take our relationship with God away. Having been baptized, we have the freedom to shout: "Only Christ is Lord!" And Kennedy or Nixon or Martyn or G.M. or anyone else is not! NO ONE is deserving of our uncritical loyalty other than Christ who reveals the intention of the triune God.

Baptism gives us freedom from being bound to every whim and fancy of the world. I matter and you matter not because of what we wear -- not because of our position or status -- not because of our friends or subdivision! WE MATTER BECAUSE GOD SAYS SO - in Baptism, we have been told that we matter - matter enough to bring the world into harmony with God's intentions. And that's OUR LINE in the world.

Secondly - baptism means specifically that you and I HAVE SOMEONE to believe in. We have been baptized means that we DO NOT believe in Lutheranism -- we DO NOT believe in nationalism -- we DO NOT believe in the words of the Bible - but rather WE BELIEVE IN the God behind those words -- the God who comes to us through the water, the words, the bread, the wine, the vessels he chooses as his vehicles.

In baptism, God has chosen us as his earthly vessels -- we have been chosen to reflect his will of love, forgiveness and compassion. And as a people and a church, we WILL BE BELIEVED IN to the extent that we reflect HIS WILL in the way we live.

Finally, as I have just alluded to, I do not choose God, he has already chosen me. Baptism means that I do not accept Christ, but that Christ has already accepted me through the power

of the Holy Spirit.

Most Lutherans overlook a serious problem in the Billy Graham crusades because he's obviously sincere. And that he is. But he is also SINCERELY wrong about man's innate capacity to choose God as the ground of his salvation. It is no accident that Graham rejects infant Baptism.

And Luther counters this rejection - he explains in the Third Article of the Creed: "I Believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel." The real "hour of decision" took place 2,000 years ago, not when we chose God, but when He chose us. What we do now IS TO ACCEPT his prior acceptance of us in Holy Baptism.

And that's where OUR LINE - our faith - hits the road. Because IN BAPTISM - God has told us that WE MATTER - that Christ is the only ONE who rules - that we can trust his way -- and that he has already chosen us -- because of these GIVENS in our faith -- we respond to all people in the same way.

We live as if EVERYONE MATTERS -- Christ's life rules our decisions -- we believe in applying a God-like character to our relationships -- and we live NOT as a guilt ridden people - but as God's chosen servants.

Servants who have the responsibility to do more than talk about love -- or to quote Bible passages - or to worship on Sunday. Yes, <sup>+</sup> servants who have the responsibility to baptize our Monday world compassion, concern, and forgiveness. <sup>with</sup>

Yes, servants who can then hear a voice from heaven saying: "These are my own dear children, with whom I am well pleased."

Amen

EPIPHANY I (The Baptism of Our Lord)  
Luth Church of the Master, Troy  
January 11, 1976

"YOU - YOU'RE THE ONE!"

"Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." Mark 1:11

When calling the Daily Tribune with my sermon topic this week, the editor's response to my title was: "Are you going to give out hamburgers, too?" Although I chuckled with her, I must admit I felt good that she caught the context of the title.

Yes - "you - your're the one" may be part of MacDonald's jingle, but it also conveys the basis of today's message. Obviously the jingle is stating that MacDonald's has chosen you and me to feast upon their bill of fare.

The jingle beyond it's catchy tune conveys a keen need of every human being -- to be the chosen one. Throughout our lives, we yearn and often even finagle-our-way to be chosen for this or that.

Just think of the innumerable areas of our lives where BEING CHOSEN tops our priority lists.

Think back to the time that you were seeking to be the chosen one of your spouse or fiance. Which one of us has never schemed to be chosen for that first date, or prom, or diamond, or to get the keys for dad's car?

How important it is to be a chosen one for one of the many in-groups at school. How many of us remember the sweat and strain we gave to be chosen for the 1st string or to make A-band??

How many of you right now are anxiously awaiting to be the CHOSEN ONE for the new position or the next promotion?

Yes - what a thrill to be a chosen one who bears new life into this world.

How exciting it is to be chosen -- whether

it's a pastoral call or simply being considered for a task that shows that you count.

How important choosing is in life-- so important that advertisers and producers spend millions each day just to get you and me to choose their thing.

Yes - you - you are the one -- you are the only one. How profound this statement is beyond its hamburger hum-drum.

Imagine my friends then what it means to be God's chosen one -- the only one who can redeem, yes return the world to the way God intended it to be. Can there be a more important one than God's chosen one???

Is it any wonder that the people of Israel were so anxious over this Messiah. They had suffered immensely. And now they were told of a chosen one who would wipe away their tears. What would he be like? Another King David - a new Solomon with more intestinal fortitude. Even John the Baptist was oft puzzled, but he continued to the build-up: "After me comes one who is mightier than I."

So it was and still is -- a God once far off, now walking nearer and nearer until he walked right into life. Walked into life by choosing a man. Choosing to enter history as a man -- and choosing this man BEFORE HE HAD EVEN PROVEN HIMSELF. Above all-choosing to enter our lives through that man's Spirit.

So it was that Jesus was baptized the divine Chosen One of God. The One with whom God was well pleased -- not pleased because Jesus had yet done anything - but pleased because Jesus was now fully one with God.

And so it is with our Baptism. God making you and me his chosen ones in Christ -- not because we have proven how pious we are -- but because God wants us to be ONE - UNITED with him. So he signs and seals us AS HIS CHOSEN ONES through a ceremonial washing.

So it is that Baptism remains at the fulcrum of our faith -- because it is God's act of choosing us. In Baptism - we proclaim to the world God's desire for all humanity. Yes, God chooses us to be his visible spirit in the world.

We are chosen to be God's power in the world-- God help us to feel the awesomeness and infinite responsibility of being SO CHOSEN. It sure should mean more than the quick-fried quarter pounders of MacDonaldis choosing!

And that's the second point of today's two-pointer. God's choosing is not simply filling one's belly -- God's choosing carries an awesome responsibility. Our baptism, like our Lord's, carries with it the same task.

And Isaiah sums it up in today's 1st lesson:

(QUOTE)

Baptism is not just surface water -- it is God's power penetrating deeply beyond the pours of our thick lives. In Baptism, God plugs in our servant generators. Baptism is God's first act of directing our lives according to his dramatic script.

And unlike stage and screen, God's script does not get us ready for easy street. God has not reserved Oscar or Emmy awards for any of his players. Being chosen for his part in life rarely gets good press -- and less often headlines. The world lusts after the bad news, not the good news of his script in Christ.

Yes - being chosen by God means we have been commissioned to live his purpose -- which often runs contrary to what is shown as the good life by many secular producers.

God's purpose is to serve all humanity in the love of Christ, not just those who belong to the club. Isaiah used the Hebrew word "mishpat" meaning God's purpose is to bring justice to all.

Amidst the exiled people of Israel, this prophet offers hope saying that God's servant quietly and without fanfare will deliver all people from injustice -- and he will not bruise those already oppressed. Such was the servant ministry of the chosen one, Jesus. And' such is the servant ministry that God has chosen us to offer in his name.

Yes - God chooses us and promises us eternal love; but with that choice he also give us the stage directions for continuing to fulfill his drama in the world. Those directions are his law -- for Jesus Christ was not the end of the law, but its fulfillment.

Like our Lord, we have been appointed to be the light to all peoples, a beacon for all nations to open eyes that are blind to God's love, to bring the captives of sin out of their prisons.

Yes - being chosen does not mean we are scott free to do as we please -- there is always responsibility in being chosen. Our responsibility is the burden of fulfilling God's laws of love.

How well we know, that unlike our Lord, we have not fulfilled God's laws. But they remain our task -- their lack of fulfillment continues to humble us -- continues to drive us to our knees.

Ylu and I know how short we have come up in fulfilling God's directions for us. But we are not left in that state of guilt. In recognizing our imperfection, God offers us deliverance from any build-up of arrogance, or deception, or whatever we have done against his purpose.

He allows us to return to the altar of his beloved Son -- where in Christ he renews us as his chosen ones.

Yes you... you are the ones, the ~~only~~ ones God has chosen to be his light. Many times we have ~~been~~ his power; many times we haven't. So

*generated*

now let us be REGENERATED in Christ's life thru  
the mystery of bread and wine -- Christ's  
forgiving presence for the chosen ones of God.

so that God can continue to say --

AMEN

*Thou art my beloved  
chosen ones - with thee  
I am well pleased.*

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD (1st after Epiphany)  
Luth Church of the Mastdr, Troy  
Jan 8, 1978

"SIGNED, SEALED, AND DELIVERED"

"... and a voice from heaven said, "This  
is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."  
Matt. 3:17

A favorite game of many children is follow  
the footprints. In the winter snow or summer  
sand on the beach, I can remember many times  
trying to walk in someone else's footprints.  
I especially remember sometimes trying to follow  
my dad -- realizing how much longer was his  
stride and larger was his step.

God left his footprints on earth as well - for  
all ~~sons/daughters~~ to try and follow. His  
footprints began in a manger - were carried into  
Egypt and back to Nazareth by Joseph and Mary;  
his footprints stood in a carpenter's shop  
and many times in temple. And there were those  
silent years where he grew in wisdom and stature  
without any report of his impression on earth.

But finally - at age 30 we encounter him with  
his feet in the Jordan River - being baptized by  
John. Many authorities believe this was the time  
that Jesus became conscious of who he truly  
was - the Messiah. Obviously - we all wonder  
WHAT and WHO Jesus thought he was during those  
first 30 years.

But when he stepped from the Jordan, ~~the~~ the issue  
was no longer questionable. Jesus heard God's  
voice saying - "This is my beloved Son (here  
meaning the anointed one), with whom I am well  
pleased."

In Jesus' baptism - God signed, sealed, and  
delivered Jesus of Nazareth as the Savior **FOR**  
the world. And yet how strange that God should  
have to baptize the Messiah -- the one already  
chosen as the Savior.

It is at a point like this that the movie "OH GOD" offers more concrete theological insight than some of the best scholars... I recommend its viewing highly. One of the consistent points of the movie is that God desires very much TO COMPLETE IDENTIFY WITH his human family. He wants humanity to know that he is a caring God - who is not detached, but deeply concerned about man's present and future existence. Quite literally - God wants to get into man's shoes - and he wants man to get into his shoes by fulfilling his will on earth.

And that's exactly why Jesus submitted himself to Baptism. Not because he was sinful -- but because he wanted man to know that he completely identified with the human condition.

On the bank of the Jordan God is saying -- I'm not only going to give you a set of foot-prints to follow -- I'm even going to walk in your shoes AS A MAN. I'm going to subject myself to the same temptations and sufferings that you encounter -- and yet I'm going to show you that love can be victorious OVER ALL.

God could be VERY WELL PLEASED with Jesus because this Son did not hold himself aloof from humanity. Jesus was not a divine untouchable. Instead - he completely identified himself with our human condition ---- he was a Savior who desired to walk in our shoes -- to feel the pain of living - to know the agony of solitude -- to experience the bitterness of rejection -- to rejoice in the community of caring friends.

In Jesus' baptism - God signs, seals, and delivers his love to us IN A DOWN TO EARTH PACKAGED FORM -- his teachings, healings, and forgiving mercy in the human form of Jesus.

In your baptism and mine - God has signed, sealed and delivered us TO FOLLOW IN Jesus' footprints.

God's sign in baptism is water -- his Word cleanses us from impurity, from injustice, from injuring each other. The water is simply his signature (his sign) -- not a magic potent -- but the daily reminder that he desires to purify us from our past guilt as well as present perversion.

His seal upon us is the cross of Jesus -- God has stamped out the eternal effect of sin through Jesus' death. By being sealed with the cross - we are reminded that we must die to sin EVERY day. Just wearing the cross or making the sign of the cross is not enough -- that's just outward piety. God seals us with the cross so that we will crucify sin.

Finally - he delivers us. And that has two dimensions. First - the easiest dimension -- deliverance from death and evil. Through baptism - God puts an eternal impression on us -- it reads: RETURN TO SENDER.

But he also delivers us INTO THE WORLD . It is this phase of delivery where God gives us an opportunity TO SHOW how much of an impression his love has made. He delivers us INTO THE WORLD as his servants -- our task is to heal the world of its divisions, its injustices, its idolatries, and its illnesses, spiritual and physical.

baptism is no different for Jesus. He received the same sign, the same seal and the same delivery dimensions. And for our sake, he fulfilled God's mission in the world. So even in our failures in the world - we are never losers in relation to God.

But the task of DELIVERY is still not done on earth. There are still many who are not baptized -- and even more who are not living up to their baptisms.

Your task and mine - before deliverance into the hands of God -- is to fulfill his healing mission on earth. We must take up again the game we played as children -- only this time following the footprints of our Lord.

And we do this not for any great reward -- no special blue ribbons in heaven -- but just for the satisfaction of hearing God say when we enter into his eternal home: This is my beloved son/daughter, with whom I am well pleased.

AMEN

2ND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Luth Church of the Master

Troy, MI

January 15, 1978 (Spec. Cong. Budget Meeting)

"CLOSE ENCOUNTER OF THE THIRD KIND"

One of the two who had heard John speak, and followed (Jesus), was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah (which means the Christ)."

Thirteen years ago when I was teaching senior high school, one of the key debate topics that students were choosing in my speech classes was the validity or fantasy of U.F.O.'s --- whether there was such a thing as Unidentified Flying Objects (show the LIFE magazine from that year).

It was fun to hear the arguments of these sophomore and seniors in high school. Most of them were keenly interested in the topic. But by and large - I think the majority of us at that time believed that UFO stories at that time were just that -- JUST STORIES!

And then along comes 1978 -- and the best-seller in paperbacks is a UFO book called - "CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND." And as many of you know - this has also become a very popular movie currently playing.

Up until a couple of weeks ago, I didn't even know what a close encounter of the third kind even was. And then I saw Dr. J. Allen Hynek on T.V. -- and he explained the phenomenon. As he explained it -- close encounters of the third kind ARE THOSE ENCOUNTERS WHERE inhabitants of the earth actually make contact (visible or otherwise) with extraterrestrials from other planetary areas." Quite to my amazement as I read the novel - Dr. Hynek says there are 1100 cases of such reports on record at this time.

These are contrasted to close encounters of the first kind and the second kind. First Kind experiences are simply sightings of UFO's -- but no interaction with our environment. SEcond Kind experiences refer to those which leave some definite mark of their presence -- like burned patches of ground, or swirls of matted vegetation, or broken tree branches, or evidence of radiation, or the failure of a cow to give milk for several days, etc.

So by now you're all asking - what does this have to do with our Christian faith - and more to the point -- what does it have to do with today's text?

Well - reserving the different kinds of encounters for a moment -- let's just take a general look at the experience of Andrew and a person encountering a UFO. Notice that I said earlier that there have been 1100 documented accounts of encounters of the 3rd kind -- and many of us here still probably feel that these stories are JUST STORIES.

Well along comes Andrew - and he reports to his brother Peter that he has had an encounter of the third kind - that he has personally been in the presence of the Messiah. Can you imagine how unbelievable this story must have been to many faithful Jews during that time!?!?! Many people probably passed off Andrew and Peter as a couple of lunatic fanatics.

But that did not stop Andrew and Peter. They continued to SHOW A PERSONAL COMMITMENT to their belief in this Messiah -- not only to the point of time and energy sacrifice-- but even to the point of sacrificing their lives FOR THE SAKE OF JESUS CHRIST. My dear Christian friends -- that's a Christian Encounter of the Third Kind - that's the goal of every Christian person -- to live with a deep personal involvement in the earthly mission of Jesus Christ.

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You see - many Christians never get beyond ENCOUNTERS OF the First or Second Kind. First Kind Christians have kind of a detached feeling about Jesus Christ. They admit that he exists - or at least that he once existed -- but they fail to have any real INTERACTION with his power. Once and a while they give a token gesture to Jesus by coming to worship or giving his church a buck or two. But Jesus Christ is not their Messiah - not their Lord -- he hasn't really taken a grip of their lives.

Likewise - there are second kind Christians. These are middle of the road believers. They're not really sure if Christ is the Messiah -- but what the heck - they don't want to gamble -- so they give him the benefit of the doubt. Many of these believers even worship frequently -- but they really haven't GIVEN THEMSELVES PERSONALLY -- they still won't let Christ take control of their lives.

Then - there are those like Andrew and Peter. These are the ones who have formed a personal attachment to this extraterrestrial king known as Jesus Christ. These are the ones who follow him through thick and thin. These are the ones who make personal sacrifices FOR THE SAKE OF HIS MISSION ON EARTH. These are the ones who LIVE by his power of love and forgiveness on earth -- WHERE IT COUNTS. These are the ones who have had CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND with Jesus Christ.

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I would like to believe that all of us are at this point, but we all know differently. There are many Christians in this congregation who have yet to get beyond an encounter of the second kind -- and some of these don't seem to care. I leave their judgment to the discretion of Jesus Christ when he comes again.

Yet for many others, myself sometimes included, it's a vasilation between the 2nd kind and the 3rd kind. And I guess that will always be the human condition while we're yet on this earth.

But one thing remains certain from the witness of Andrew and Peter. True believers are never satisfied with a ho-hum response to the Messiah. They are just like real UFO freaks -- they are always seeking to make believers out of the rest of the world. Their goal is always to MANIFEST to show that they have had CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND with Jesus Christ.

They will sacrifice themselves personally to make the power of Jesus' love and forgiveness VERY REAL to a world that often laughs at the story of Jesus Christ -- a world that often denies the Messiahship of Jesus Christ -- a world that often calls the incarnation and resurrection JUST ANOTHER good fairy tale.

AMEN

EPIPHANY I (Baptism of Jesus)  
Lutheran Church of the Master, Troy  
Jan. 7, 1979

"WHEN YOU'VE SEEN THE LIGHT ..."

Then Peter addressed them: 'The truth I have now come to realize (I've seen the light...),' he said, 'is that God does not have favorites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him.'

Acts 10:34-35

Epiphany is the season of the light... the showing or shining forth of Christ. Amidst its symbolism is the star, the wise men, and ~~added to these~~ by the modern lectionary scholars is the baptism of Jesus. The message of Epiphany is quite simple: God's intention is light, not darkness. Thus, the Christian mission is to spread God's light as Christ did and still does through his faithful followers.

Isn't it amazing how some of the basic symbols of the Christian faith have become common, everyday expressions. Which one of us here has never said: "Well, you've finally seen the light." Obviously, we mean by that expression that that other person has finally comprehended the truth - he's seen the light.

Well - I need not tell you that there are many flashing lights to follow these days. Never before have so many conflicting lights beckoned young people to come along -- whether the rock concert stage or the lights of a Trans Am -- whether the superdome lights or the glare of the assembly line at nearly \$7 an hour. So many lights to chose from.

But along comes Jesus Christ - and all of a sudden we hear the evngelists saying THAT HE IS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD. And they are not saying that he is just another one among many -- they are saying that he is THE ONLY ONE -- that he is the singular light to follow in life.

How can this claim be made? What is so unique about the light of Christ? "When you have seen his light -- what special significance does it have? I would like to suggest three qualities of His light so unique - so singular - so different from all others: NAMELY, it is penetrating - impartial - and permanent.

Most lights of life only reflect things on the surface. The football lights show us great runners, skillful passers, and bullfied blockers. The hollywood lights show us pretty faces and captivating curves. The lights of industry show us shiny-sleak body trim and flashy designs. The lights of medicine show us pulsating organisms, both external and internal. The all concert and disco lights reflect sweaty and sensuous movements and gyrations. But all these reflections ONLY TOUCH the superficial level of existence.

Every human being needs a light that will penetrate deeper into his consciousness. A light that will cleanse away his inner hurts and guilts. A light that will give him a sense of self-worth-- a positive charge.

Only the light of Epiphany deals with this level of humanity. The light of Christ reflects itself in Baptsim - Holy Communion - Service to others - sacrifice - mercy and compassion. The light of Christ deals with the soul of man rather than merely his skin. And every human being, whether he admits it to himself or not, needs to feel right in his soul -- in that center or ground of his being.

When you've seen the light OF CHRIST -- you feel a light that penetrates deeper than the skin. That's why people who are living a life contrary to the will of God avoid worship - avoid any contact with the light of Christ -- because they are often overdosed with guilt.

How sad it is that they have only seen one dimension of Christ's light! They have failed to see the most radiant beam of Christ's light: the powerful word of forgiveness made known through baptism, communion, and the word of forgiveness.

Yes - there is something very special about any person WHO HAS REALLY SEEN THE LIGHT ... that person emanates a peace within himself ... a real acceptance of others ... a real sense of joy for living. That person has experienced the light of Christ ... its penetrating power.

Then there's that second quality that's so different from all other lights of the world. The spotlights of society are most often only focused on the superstars -- or the socially acceptable. So often - the warmth of the world's light is only possible if you have certain rank, or certain talents, or social standing, or a particular racial or ethnic mix.

But today's lesson from Acts reflects one of the greatest qualities of God's relationship to us: he is impartial - there are no favorites in God's kingdom. Regardless of rank or race, rookie or workaholic -- God's light falls on all alike.

When you've seen the light of Christ ... you know you are acceptable!! There is no other message that you can possibly get from Christ. How great it is to have seen Christ's light -- ~~yes of the only~~ lights in life where you don't have to give an audition to be loved and accepted. What good news it is to know that there is one star - one relationship where we are loved first before we have to prove ourselves.

We need only stand in front of that light and reveal our total selves -- our doubts, our failures, our imperfections -- confident that God will not play favorites -- HE WILL ACCEPT EVERYONE who has the guts to stand before him.

~~YES~~ what a thrill it is to know other Christians who have seen this light -- people who radiate an ~~impartial~~ acceptance of others -- people who don't play favorites in their faith-life. God help each of us to see and reflect that degree of his light!!

Finally - only the light of Christ is permanent! It was witnessed with great excitement by three astrologers nearly 2000 years ago -- and that same excitement is being shared among all kinds of specialists today!

But what about the other lights?? Well, whether it's hollywood, the rock circuit, the athletic world, or the medical arena -- the discoveries are made, they last for a decade or two, or maybe even ~~all~~ lifetime -- and then they are buried with the memories of that age. There are no eternal lights in this world -- except that one who came into the world to redeem it from its own idolatry -- Jesus Christ.

When you've seen his light -- you've finally latched onto something that is everlasting. And that's a power that's worth spreading.

And so - we come here to let his light penetrate our lives through baptism, holy communion and the Word. And then we take that light with us -- and we love all mankind, not playing any favorites. And finally, we are received into his eternal light -- forever visible to future generations!

AMEN

EPIPHANY (Baptism of our Lord)  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
January 8, 1984  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"WHEN YOU WISH UPON A STAR" (make sure it's a light to Christ!)

"I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:7) And Peter said, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears (who respects) him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Acts 10:34

Epiphany is the season of the light -- the showing or shining forth of the Christ. It is the time where we shift from Jesus crib to Jesus' claim as the Christ! Amidst its symbolism is the star and wise men -- and today lectionary scholars have added the baptism of Jesus. The message of Epiphany is quite simple: GOD'S INTENTION FOR THE WORLD IS LIGHT, NOT DARKNESS! Thus the Christian mission is to spread God's light as Christ did and still does through his faithful followers.

Much like the wise men were wishing upon a star some 1200 years ago -- there are still millions today wishing upon stars. Regretably - they are not looking for a Messiah at the end of their star search. They are literally looking for meaning and purpose from the stars themselves. They are thinking that the signs of the zodiac offer the ultimate meaning and answers for life's perplexing questions.

Needless to say - the wise men had a different vision for the star they were following. They knew there were no answers to be found in a star itself -- but they were **wishing** this star would lead them to a GREATER LIGHT -- A GREATER SOURCE OF TRUTH AND HOPE for the world. And that was the result of their wish upon a star -- THEY WERE LED TO THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

Possibly that should be today's title: instead of "When you wish upon a Star" the real thrust of today's texts is "When you've seen the light -- then what??" What's the real worth of all this Epiphany talk about Christ being the LIGHT OF THE WORLD?? Is this merely theological

mumbo-jumbo -- or is there a deeper truth in calling Christ the light of the world?!? As Christians we obviously believe that Christ is that deeper truth for life -- because his light manifests the qualities of human hope and wholeness -- his light is truth because it is PENETRATING ... IMPARTIAL ... AND PERMANENT. These are the qualities of the LIGHT OF THE WORLD -- a worldly presence which is penetrating, impartial, and permanent!

Most lights of life only reflect things on the surface. The football lights show us great runners, skillful passers, and bullfied blockers. The hollywood lights show us pretty faces and captivating curves. The lights of industry show us shiny-sleak body trim and see-through glass! The lights of medicine show us pulsating organisms - both external and internal. But all these reflections WHO ONLY the superficial level of existence.

Every human being needs a light that will penetrate deeper into his/her consciousness... a light that will cleanse away the deeper hurts and guilts.... a light that will give a renewed sense of self-worth ... a positive affirmation.

The light of Epiphany deals with this level of humanity! The light of Christ reflects itself in Baptism ... Holy Communion ...service to others ... justice and sacrifice... mercy and compassion. The light of Christ deals with the soul of man rather than merely the skin of humanity. And every human being - whether he admits it or not -- needs to feel right in his/her soul -- in that center or ground of being.

When you've seen the light of Christ -- you feel a light that penetrates deeper than the skin. That's why those who regularly worship this Christ can feel so at peace EVEN WHEN THEIR LIVES ARE NOT PERFECT -- because they have experienced Christ's radiant beam of forgiveness through word and sacrament. How sad for those who continue to avoid the light of Christ -- who choose to continue to be overdosed with their guilt!!

Yes - like those wise men of old -- there is something very special about a person who has seen the Light of Christ! That person emanates a new sense of peace ... he/she is no longer intimidated by the ruthless Herods of this world ... that persons reflects a joy for living -- there is a penetrating power of love oozing forth from that life!!

But the light of Christ also manifests the quality of impartiality! Christ light contradicts the spotlights of this world -- which only shed their beams on superstars and social-climbers! So often the warmth of the world's light is only felt by those of certain rank ... or with certain talents ... or who have certain social standing ... or possess a particular racial or ethnic mix.

But today's text from Acts reflects one of the greatest qualities of Christ and his relationship to us: HE IS IMPARTIAL! He doesn't play favorites! He doesn't care where we live ... who we come from ... or what clubs we belong to. Regardless of rank or race ... rookie or retired -- God's light falls equally on all alike.

How great it is to be living under that light! Christ's light is the only one where you don't have to give an audition to be loved or accepted. In Holy Baptism -- God has assured us from the beginning that we are loved and accepted!

Holy Baptism - like Holy Communion - gives us the assurance that we can stand in the light of Christ and reveal our total selves. We don't have to hide behind our doubts or failures or imperfections. In Christ, we have been made confident that God plays no favorites -- we are all sinners who have fallen short of God's glory! He will accept every one of us who has the guts to stand before him and claim him as our Savior!!

And that's the lifestyle that results from being in the light of Christ. Christ's love has empowered us to be impartial in our love for others. We look beyond the clothes, the cars, the skin and all the other superficial traits of culture. Like God himself - we look first to the human need ... and we seek to satisfy that human need -- whether it's for food, for forgiveness, or for faith, hope & love!

Finally - the light of Christ is not here today and gone tomorrow! Epiphany is not a one-day celebration. It is an eternal light -- a presence that shines forever in this world and beyond this world. There are no other eternal lights in this world BUT ONE! That light came into this world to redeem it -- to free its inhabitants from worshipping idols and ideologies and ideas and all other forms of creation.

Is it any wonder that three wise men some 1900 years ago were so determined to wish upon a star?!? They were seeking more than a star that was here today and gone tomorrow! They sought to latch onto a power -- a light -- a truth that never changes: THE LOVE OF CHRIST, THE MESSIAH!

That's also why we're still here some 1900 years later -- because we too have seen the light! Through baptism, through Holy Communion, through the Word and deeds of Jesus Christ -- we have come to see that the star of Bethlehem led to the Cross of Calvary and the Resurrection of Easter Morning. In the life of Christ -- we have seen a penetrating, impartial and everlasting light for our lives. And for that reason - we too worship and bow down before Him ... and offer him the gifts and talents of our lives!

AMEN

ẼPIPHANY II (BAPTISM OF JESUS)  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
January 11, 1987  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

**"TO BE AMONG THE GREATEST!"**

"I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, and a light for the Gentiles, to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness." Isaiah 42:6-7

Most of us are reluctant to think of ourselves as "great people." Average, yes. Typical, probably. Nice people, definitely. Even good people, but not "the greatest!" We have trouble thinking about ourselves as being "really great! It just sounds too egotistical ... too self-serving, too arrogant.

And yet -- most of us deep down want "to be among the greatest!" We really don't want to be "just average" or just "typical." If questioned, few of us would really admit it - but we do aspire toward greatness. In fact, in a community such as ours, there are many graphic evidences of our desire "to be among the greatest." Our homes, our jobs, our friends, our associations, our dress codes -- we surround ourselves with what the world calls "greatness."

And yet with all this affluence and all these attempts at greatness, very few of us would claim "greatness." In fact, many of us would say we feel inadequate, sometimes worthless, often like failures, and many times unsure of ourselves. The facts are -- most of us don't really think that much of ourselves.

And maybe there's a lesson to be learned here. Maybe that's something God wanted to communicate to us in the first place -- that when we isolate ourselves, when we try to be great ALL ALONE, when we make our only aim "egotistical greatness," maybe we will always feel inadequate -- not good enough. Because one important ingredient has been left out of this human equation -- the presence and power of God.

The psychologist examines the human spirit and determines we are made up of an id, ego, and superego. But does that make us feel secure. Once we have determined that our lives are the products of stimulus and response -- have we then mastered life? The chemist looks at human life and concludes that human existence is worth \$1.98 -- that's our chemical value. Certainly, that's not the answer. The sociologist concludes we are merely products of our environments ... and the media considers us mindless robots who can be controlled with slick messages. Let's face it -- having the right parents, the right genes, the right education, the right background -- having all these still

does not "give us greatness." "To be among the greatest" goes beyond the right psychology, or the right chemistry or the right human environment. Human greatness is purely a gift. In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, God graces us with both human and divine greatness. Once baptized, we are forever "among the the greatest."

That sounds like a rather incredible claim. But it is the truth of baptism. It is in Baptism that God endows us with his greatness ... just as he endowed Jesus with greatness in Baptism. And so as we celebrate the greatness of Jesus' baptism today - we also celebrate that same greatness given to us in Holy Baptism.

For there is no greater greatness in this world than having THE IDENTITY OF JESUS CHRIST. And that is a gift of Holy Baptism. As we receive God's grace in Baptism, we are made ONE forever with Jesus Christ. Nothing can change that identity -- not tragedy, not immorality, not sinfulness, not death itself. As I watched little one-pound Nicole Wagner die in her mother's arms on Thursday night -- I writhed with pain over her human loss. But I rejoiced greatly that death would not ever separate Nicole from the loving hands of God. Her baptism was the assurance that she had God's full identity, even though she barely had any human identity.

What greater greatness could we ever be given. God has made us totally one with him and each other. By baptism, we have been declared TOTALLY ACCEPTABLE to him and each other. Is it any wonder that Peter says in Acts 10 - "God shows no favoritism but accepts all people equally who respect him."

Baptism totally changes the selfishness of our hearts. Our attitude is no longer like that of the man from the Mid-West who was visiting New York City for the first time. Someone asked him if he would be visiting the United Nations building. He answered, "Heaven's no. Confidentially, I understand the place is just crawling with foreigners." In becoming one with Christ in Baptism, our natural prejudices are diminished ... because we now have the heart and mind of God. We now possess both a human and divine character ... and we strive to be like God -- accepting and forgiving of those different from ourselves.

This example was probably best illustrated by a chief executive officer of a Toledo manufacturing firm who made a regular habit of showing up on the production line unannounced. He would often roll up his sleeves and help the assemblers. One guy once asked, "Why do you do this?" The CEO replied, "I don't know of a better way to feel the pulse of the workers. It's the only way that I can see things from their point of view." He always returned to the solitude of his office with some new insight of the so-called "ordinary" worker.

Jesus' baptism was like "going down to the production line." He certainly did not have to be baptized, but this was the only way that he could fully understand and identify with our sinful nature. In Baptism, he took upon himself our sinful nature. Likewise, in baptism we become one with him and all conditions of humanity. And that is our true greatness -- that we are accepting and forgiving of all conditions of humanity.

Let's face it -- that is true greatness: BEING TOTALLY ACCEPTING AND FORGIVING OF ALL HUMANITY! That's the kind of greatness that has been given through Holy Baptism. Is it any wonder that we are among the greatest?!

But our greatness is more than identity. In Baptism, God has also gifted us with a new human purpose: WE HAVE BEEN CHOSEN TO BE GOD'S SPECIAL LIGHT TO ALL OTHER PEOPLE. Israel was not better than all other nations, she was just chosen to show the goodness of God. Likewise, as American Christians, we cannot say that America is better than all other nations, not even Russia. But because so many Americans have been gifted with God's greatness thru baptism, God has chosen America to be a greater light of his goodness in this world. And certainly America has and continues to fulfill that purpose more graphically than Russia, where God's baptismal goodness is stifled.

Possibly Dr. James Dobson's story about his pilot friend best illustrates our greatness of purpose. His friend was piloting a small engine plane at dusk, heading toward a small county airport. Night fell very quickly. By the time he reached the airport, he could not see the paved landing strip. The lights on his plane were inadequate to cut through the dark, foggy night. So he began circling the airport. After two hours of uncertain circling, he figured he would run out of fuel and plunge to his death within moments.

But a neighboring farmer had heard the light plane circling and surmised its problem. The farmer jumped in his car and headed for the airport. Not knowing how to switch on the airport's field lights, the farmer settled for driving up and down the runway with his highbeams lighted showing the pilot the dimensions of the landing strip. Then he pulled his car to the end of the runway ... and with highbeams still shining, watched the pilot land safely.

Baptized Christians are the highbeams of God shining thru the darkness of the world. Our purpose is to show the world where love, acceptance and forgiveness can be found. It's not that baptism means we are more loved than others, it just means that we have been chosen TO REFLECT THAT LOVE!

And certainly that qualifies us TO BE AMONG THE GREATEST of all people in the world. But fulfilling the

love of God possibly leads us to the ultimate greatness of our baptism! Having God's identity and purpose through Holy Baptism, we are now empowered to willingly serve others. Or stated differently, our ultimate greatness is not in ourselves, but in our mission to others. That is the acid test of Holy Baptism ... that is when one really knows if his baptism has taken root ... that is the true sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit -- when we not only serve ourselves, but willingly seek to serve others.

The true greatness of the church is not when it merely pays salaries or renovates sanctuaries or fulfills its operating costs. These realities are achieved by any club. True greatness is when the church is committed to serving the lost, the needy, the broken, the fragmented, the forgotten in the world. That was certainly exhibited at Hope this Christmas -- not only did members give generously to the Christmas offering, but we received in addition nearly \$2000 for Feed Your Neighbor in December alone. Our true greatness is when we allow God to take us by the hand to rescue and help others.

That's best illustrated in that famous story of the people who built a lighthouse to save others from the dangers of the ocean. The lighthouse group had one commitment -- to rescue people in peril. But after some time, they decided there was no reason for the whole group to take this risk. So many of them merely chose to staff the lighthouse. And with further time, they decided they would all stay home and just make the lighthouse light brighter ... letting people find their own way.

Then after further time passed, the group decided they were tired of welcoming bedraggled strangers who came into their homes dripping all over their carpets -- so they dimmed the lighthouse light. With further time, they decided the lighthouse needed new carpeting and an elevator to the top. They got so busy with these projects that they failed to notice that the lighthouse light had burned out. And after a little longer, someone quietly changed the front sign from "Lighthouse" to "Clubhouse." And in the process -- they had given up their identity, their purpose and their mission -- but most of all, they had sacrificed their God-given greatness!

God help us to never lose sight of the greatness of our identity, our purpose or our mission -- TO BE GOD'S LIGHT OF FORGIVING LOVE FOR A SINFUL WORLD. God only knows we all need that kind of rescue. And what a privilege it is TO BE AMONG THE GREATEST -- THOSE WHO HAVE ACCEPTED THE IDENTITY, THE PURPOSE, AND THE MISSION OF BEING GOD'S RESCUE TEAM IN THIS WORLD. Yes, we are certainly "among the greatest," because in baptizing us God has made us his "lighthouse" for the world. Let us never turn this into our "clubhouse!"

AMEN.

EPIPHANY I (Baptism of Jesus)  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
January 10, 1988  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## "A CLEAN SWORD & A DIRTY BIBLE"

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: 'I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you: 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.'"      Isaiah 42:4-7

... and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.'      Mark 1:11

Two hundred years ago there was a Scottish regiment quartered in Edinburgh Castle. Many of the officers were devout men. Every evening they gathered together and raised their mugs to the following toast: "A Clean Sword and A Dirty Bible." Sound a little strange ... even sacreligious? Well, the "clean sword" referred to their greatest hope that they would not have to use their swords in battle. And the "dirty Bible" referred to their Bibles which had been smudged and tattered from constant use. In essence, these men were praying to be delivered from battle--and reminding themselves that their conscience and confidence was in the Word of God, not their swords. Their real strength and support was from the Bible.

Wouldn't you agree - there's a need today for more "clean swords" ... for less trust in military might, for fewer hand guns in our homes, for a drastic reduction in caustic tongues, for a concerted challenge to alcoholism, drug abuse, moral decadence and all other addictions which destroy and exploit human life.

And equally so - don't we still need more "dirty Bibles" in our society? It has been one of my greatest joys in the last 8-1/2 years to observe the sizeable growth in people attending Bible Studies, LWL, W and W, Lay Visitation, Sunday Studies. But as your pastors and DCE learned last year at the Kerygma conference -- there is still 75% "biblical illiteracy" in the average congregation ... meaning people who never read the Bible.

Of course many people might reasonable say to me, "Oh come on Martyn, the Bible is an ancient, historic document -- totally out of touch with our sophisticated society. Of what value is this book, whose world view portrays all kinds of scientific inaccuracies. Well, we dare not argue that the Bible offers all the scientific facts. But of course that was never its intent. The Bible's purpose far surpasses the relativity of scientific hypotheses; the Bible attempts to speak to the ultimate issues and concerns of life, LIKE:

What is the true character of love? How can I avoid a "dead end" lifestyle? How can I become more accepting of my imperfection and God's goodness? How can I better cope with my persistent hostility? Where is there relief from betrayal? What or whom can I really trust? What is my greatest source of security? Is there life support after the bottom drops out? Or to sum it up in one major question: HOW CAN YOU AND I BEST COPE WITH ALL THE CHAOS AROUND US??

This is hardly a new question. We are by no means the first generation to experience the chaos of life. We simply have some unique forms of chaos -- like AIDS, cancer, global competition, world hunger, ozone pollution, water shortages, etc. Every era has had its own expression of chaos. Certainly the Scottish regiment knew the chaos of bitter battle and other atrocities. But new order, new life, new opportunity, new confidence was breathed into these weary soldiers thru the smudged reflections of scripture - their dirty Bibles. Through reading the Word of God, these men found an everlasting antidote to chaos: 1) God's eternal intent for earthly order, 2) God's assurance of Good News even amidst the daily assaults of bad news, and 3) God's epiphany ... God's manifested principles of guidance for radiant daily living. The antidote is no different for us today than it was 200 years ago. The Bible is not pie-in-the-sky-by-and-bye; it is a down-to-earth revelation of God's plan for daily renewal and revitalization.

First and foremost - from Genesis to Revelation - the great message of Scripture is that things tomorrow will not be radically different from today. Unlike any other book in history, the Bible makes clear that God's intent is to give constancy, security, orderliness, and ongoing sustenance to our daily lives. That's why Isaiah says, "I have taken you by the hand and kept you." God never forsakes his principle of orderliness.

Unlike the Deistic philosophy of God and creation, God didn't get the thing going and then bail out saying: "Now you guys take over. I'll see you again in a few million years." Unlike any Big-Bang theory, God structured creation with natural and social laws of orderliness.

Many of you have possibly heard the story of the man who frequents alligator farms in Florida. Well, when I met him last week, he says to me in his slightly anebriated way: "Hey, you, you know that an alligator lays 10,000 eggs... and you can depend on it!" I made no reply. He went on, "And out of that, 9,000 float away. The fish eat em." "So ..." I began. "And you can depend on that too," he says. "Out of the 1000 left, other alligators eat 900." I said, "I'm sure you can depend on that." And he says, "Yep, you shore can. And furthermore, of the 100 left, 99 get squashed by their mother ... and you can depend upon that!" I finally said, "Why is it so important that I can depend upon these things?" "Well, if it weren't for that, you'd be swimming in gators!"

Sometimes we all feel like we're swimming in gators ... like they're crawling down our backs. We feel hassled ... we get rejected ... we lose loved ones ... we feel that nobody cares ... we miss golden opportunities. Sometimes life feels full of gators. But then God speaks again thru Genesis or Isaiah. Onto the formless void of darkness and deep chaos, where everything seemingly happens in random starts and stops, God speaks and says, "Let there be light!" And light again comes forth, because God's words are always majestic, orderly actions. And in the process of day following night and night following day, God gradually places chaos into the perspective of his order. God's time can always be depended upon -- he will change the present chaos into future order. For God from the very beginning has always been undoing chaos. That's the Word of the Bible. It was "good" 2000 years ago ... and it is still "very good" today. God's Word can always be depended upon. (And we know that for a fact now that Cleveland has totally crushed the Colts -- there is a new day, a new order, a new victory for those who have suffered only defeats!)

Is it any wonder that God gave this natural order another dimension called social order - namely, thru the Torah, his Law. God's social laws were not his desire to be punitive or restrictive to his people - they were an expression of his righteousness ... his love for his people ... his constant intent to keep his creation and people in good order. God didn't say: THOU SHALT NOT STEAL; God said, certainly faithful people will not steal, that will throw society into more chaos. God didn't say, THOU SHALT NOT KILL; God said, certainly faithful people will not murder, for that would incite great chaos among neighbors. God's social/religious law is an expression of his loving righteousness ... his "good" order. Is it any wonder that we need to learn it well from a "dirty Bible?"

But God's intent at sustaining an orderly creation through natural and social laws was not "good" enough. As "good" as God's good order was and still is - the human spirit and human community was not satisfied. The facts were and still are ... humanity does not fully surrender to God's order of things (his will). Man wants his own way ... he's rebellious and disobedient -- he continues to create chaos amidst God's good order. And only God can offer GOOD NEWS amidst such human rebellion.

God had spoken the truth, but man needed to see the truth in the flesh. God had shown the way, but humanity needed to observe someone walk that way. God had revealed the true meaning of life, but man and woman had to see some one become a suffering servant before they would believe!

It's much like the story of the couple having marital problems who came for pastoral counseling. At one point in the session, the husband said, "I've given you everything you could ever want: a new home, two cars, a fashionable wardrobe, status in the community, success and economic security ... what more could you possibly want?"

His wife slowly turned to him and said, "Yes, you've given me everything ... everything except yourself!"

In creation - God gave us all the things we could possibly desire to sustain our lives. But the things of creation are never enough! In Jesus Christ, God went the full distance: He gave himself! And that gift ... like none other ... helps us to cope with the chaos all around us. For no matter how well-ordered our world, there is still much bad news and darkness. Some of this is caused by human errors and foolishness; some is the result of disease and unnatural mutations; some is just a mystery of circumstances ... being in the wrong place at the right time. Even in this well-ordered world, there is much darkness.

In the Epiphany season, God shows us the real thing - the only solution to global and personal chaos - the star that shines on the life of Jesus Christ. God again speaks, and this time his actions radiate a life of total love and servanthood - the true meaning of life. And God says, "Come - celebrate the Baptism of my son, Jesus Christ ... because thru Baptism I announce to you that you are mine forever ... no matter how dirty your life has become. Thru Holy Baptism, God gives us love and acceptance that we could never earn through our own efforts ... acceptance which we could never deserve because of our own righteousness.

But then he says, make Holy Baptism more than a fact of your past; make it a force for your present. There's a story of a young hunter who became deathly sick in a remote log cabin. He would have died, but an old miner found him and lovingly nursed him back to health. When the young hunter was ready to leave, the old man wanted him to have something to meet future troubles. He decided to give the hunter his costliest gem - an uncut emerald which he sewed into the hunter's sheepskin. Years later, the old miner saw the young hunter begging on the streets, but still wearing his sheepskin. "What did you do with the emerald," the old man asked. "What emerald," replied the hunter. The priceless gem had remained hidden in his sheepskin all those years. Too many Christians do the same thing with their baptisms - they hide this precious gem and never put it to real use.

Luther says, "Let everyone regard his baptism as his outer garment to be visibly worn at all times. To wear the garment of baptism is to always radiate the love and forgiveness of God. Baptism is our garment for all seasons. It protects us from the winter-like cold of rejection by others, since we always have God's acceptance. It gives us the spring-like freshness of new life because we are always growing in forgiveness. It strengthens us against the summer-heat of temptation, and it convinces us in the autumn-like darkening of our days that we have the unquenchable light of Christ in our hearts leading us again to the resurrection of a new spring! Baptism is a garment for all seasons. The Bible tells us: "Don't leave home without it!"

But God doesn't stop there either. It's one thing to have the gift of life; it's another to share it. Bishop Rave on Wednesday night asked, "Why is it that Christians are so much more willing to celebrate Christmas than they are Epiphany? He answered: Because Christmas lets us hold the baby ... and we love holding babies. But Epiphany beckons us to share this new life ... to give the baby to someone else. And who wants to give away new life??"

The Bible helps us cope with chaos by assuring us that God has given us a dependable, well-ordered world. And then the Bible goes one step farther: it calls us to be Baptized so that we will always have the assurance of "being o.k. even when we blow it!" But then the Bible takes us yet into a third dimension: here God says ... "become the guiding star of Christ for others ... be guided by his life, and through his spirit, guide others to the same place.

God was well-pleased with Jesus because he was confident that Jesus would be guided by Godly righteousness. God is equally well-pleased with you and me when we show that we are following the same star of Christ. Like Christ, we are called to help the blind to see, to bring justice to all nations, to bring all prisoners out of their dungeons of darkness.

Is your voice one of forgiveness when you speak ... or is it a caustic sword?

Are your hands extended and uplifting the burdens of others ... or are they merely clutching creation for yourself?

Do your feet carry you to your needy neighbor with more than pious words ... or are your feet frozen to your own turf?

Is your body supporting the needs of others ... or is your body just indulging itself?

Are you carrying "A Clean Sword & A Dirty Bible?" ... or is yours a dirty sword and clean Bible??

AMEN.

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD (Epiphany I)  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
January 12, 1991  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"TO DREAM THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM"

"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; ... he will not fail or be discouraged til he has established justice in the earth; ..." Isaiah 42:1-2

"Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Acts 10:34

I hope you read and re-read the seven verses from Isaiah today: they represent God's DREAM for his people ... his dream for his people, Israel ... his dream for his beloved son, Jesus... and his dream for you and me, his people today!

In Holy Baptism, just as he did for Jesus, God adopts us to be his special children with whom he is well pleased. Once baptized - God dreams about us ... he dreams that we will serve others just like his beloved son ... he dreams that we will become instruments of light for the darkness of this world ... he dreams that we will bring others out of the gloom of guilt and greed ... out of the shadows of slander and suffocation with the self.

God has always had great hopes and dreams for his people. And he gave us the example of Jesus so that we would know what his hopes and dreams were all about. Yes, we belong to Jesus Christ ... so we are a people who dream big dreams!!

Most of you know, maybe better than me, that dreaming is very essential to living. Show me a person who doesn't dream and I'll show you a dull person. I don't necessarily mean the dreams we have at night (in fact, since my heart surgery - I remember very little of those dreams). I'm talking about the real dreams of life -- THE VISIONS, THE ASPIRATIONS, THE HOPES, THE FANTASIES ABOUT THE FUTURE. These are the real dreams of life. And all people who are REALLY alive are people who dream these dreams -- about better days, and better ways, and better things, and better relationships, and better circumstances for daily living in tomorrow's world.

TO LIVE WITHOUT THESE HOPES AND DREAMS is to be spiritually dead! God has created all people, whether believers or not, to have the desire and capacity to DREAM THESE DREAMS ... to have a vision for a better life. Some seek it selfishly, others seek it sacrificially, and still others seek it any way they can get it!

But we are all born to be dreamers. And that is esp.

true for Christians. It is impossible to believe in Jesus Christ and not be a dreamer. Disciples of Jesus Christ are always idealistic people ... dreamers always looking for a better way ... peacemakers always hoping for greater justice and harmony on earth ... caretakers of creation always seeking a future with greater hope and promise. Yes, Xans dream on ... always looking for God's hope and challenge, and forever struggling to fulfill it. We live TO DREAM GOD'S IMPOSSIBLE DREAM ... TO FIGHT THE UNBEARABLE FIGHT ... to try when our arms are too weary, to reach the unreachable star. As the song says: "this is our quest, to follow His star ... no matter how hopeless, no matter how far ... to fight for the right, without question or pause ... to be willing to march into hell, for a heavenly cause. Yes, this world will be better for this ... because one man scorned and covered with scars, still strove with his last ounce of courage ... to reach the unreachable star."

That's God's impossible dream reflected today in the baptism of Jesus ... and in each of our own baptisms. We have been adopted by God TO DREAM HIS IMPOSSIBLE DREAM. So, what does that really mean?? It means that we have been made ONE with God and Jesus Christ in order to first BRING JUSTICE TO ALL PEOPLE, second TO SHOW THAT GOD OFFERS NO FAVORITISM OR PARTIALITY TO ANY OF HIS CHILDREN, and third TO IDENTIFY WITH GOD'S GOODNESS RATHER THAN LIFE'S BADNESS. That's the impossible dream of Holy Baptism. And esp. in Epiphany, this is our quest ... to follow the star of God's direction ... no matter how hopeless, no matter how far!

Isaiah says, "Behold my servant, the chosen one whom I uphold ... I have put my spirit upon him that he will bring forth justice to all peoples." We all know that JUSTICE is an impossible dream in an "unfair world," but that is still our quest ... that is still God's direction. No matter how hopeless we think it is, it is our mission as baptized Christians to reach for that unreachable star/justice f/all.

No story better captures this vision, THIS DREAM FOR JUSTICE, than the story about Fiorello LaGuardia, mayor of NY City during the depression. One cold night in January, 1935, the mayor turned up at the night court that served the poorest down-and-outers of NY. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took the bench himself. After a few minutes, a tattered woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told the mayor of her plight and her starving family, but the baker refused to drop the charges. LaGuardia had to fine her or put her in jail. So he fined her, then reached in his own pocket and paid the fine. Then he turned to the courtroom and fined every person there 50 cents "for living in a town that forced a mother to have to steal bread to feed her family." The fines were collected, and the bewildered mother went home with \$47.50.

That story is a VISION OF GOD'S JUSTICE FOR ALL! JUSTICE

is when nobody in this world has to think about stealing in order to feed their family the basic necessities. As we are well aware after last Sunday, there is a lot of stealing going on in our society today that is just gross perversity & wretchedness. The teenagers involved in last Sunday's incident can be characterized as little more than hell raisers. And with time, they will ultimately pay the price and suffer the consequences.

But let us not jump to wrongful conclusions on the basis of the few rotten apples amidst God's plentiful vineyard. There are many in Toledo today who are seeking justice -- like the 30-yr-old black ex-con who came to see me last Tuesday morning. All he wanted was a chance to work -- if only for a few hours, because he could not ask for an advance on his pay since he had only been released from prison a week earlier. But because he was an ex-con ... and because he was black ... he said: "You white Christians really don't care, do you - all you see is that I am black and an ex-con, so you want me out of your way and your life?!?" Isaiah says today that God's servant "does not break a bruised reed, nor will he quench a dimly burning wick." If ever there was a dimly burning wick, it was this ex-con looking for somebody who would NOT SNUFF OUT HIS DESIRE TO LIVE A BETTER LIFE! It WILL NOT take much to turn this man into a hardened criminal ... because he is right on the edge. All he wanted was for someone to give him a fair hearing ... someone to listen. God has asked you and me to be that SOMEONE ... to be that dreamer ... that person who will dream his dream of justice for all - not only for White, Anglo, Saxon, Work-ethic, Protestants. God says today - if you are one of my baptized servants - you will not quench the dimly burning wick of anyone who is seeking A BETTER LIFE. That's JUSTICE!

But God dreams on and on and on. He will not play the human game of CHOOSING favorites. Some of us still think that the first successful revolution in this world occurred shortly before 1776. In reality, the first successful revolution began with the incarnation of God into the flesh of Jesus Christ. For the first time in Jewish history, the people of God realized that Yahweh never intended to show favoritism toward the Jews. And yet to this very day, many Christians are still sleeping through a revolution that has been ongoing for 2000 years: THEY STILL THINK THAT GOD SHOWS PARTIALITY TOWARD AMERICANS, OR GERMANS, OR SCANDIHOVIANS, or Lutherans, or some other parochial, ethnic tribe.

The most famous case of an American sleeping through a revolution was sketched by Washington Irving. Rip Van Winkle supposedly went to sleep for 20 years in colonial times and awoke to a new nation under the leadership of George Washington. This story is easily translatable to our own times. Imagine how parochial you or I would be if we had slept through the past 20 years?!? Twenty years ago most of us figured that the Japs couldn't build anything that would last for more than a day. Last week, our president and a host of leading industrialists from America were pleading

and begging to establish American markets on Japanese soil. I hope and pray those markets will soon be established ... but I hardly think that "not changing tires on a Japanese-made vehicle" is the way to dream with God as an American. Likewise, 20 years ago, you would be hard pressed to find a female pastor in any Lutheran Church; today more than 1/3 of our seminary graduates are female clergy. There was once a time that anyone east of West Germany was better dead than red. Within the past year, God is calling for a whole new vision of Communism from Americans and a whole new understanding of Americans from Communists. Truly, those adopted by God have learned in every generation that a parochial vision of history leads to alienation and heartache in this world. The real revolution on earth did not begin in 1776 -- it began with God becoming THE WAY AND TRUTH FOR ALL FLESH IN THIS WORLD. It is nigh time that we wake up from our long sleep ... and start dreaming the impossible dream of our God: THAT GOD SHOWS NO FAVORITISM TO ANY ETHNIC OR RELIGIOUS GROUP WHICH CLAIMS TO HAVE AN EDGE ON HIS GRACE AND TRUTH!

Finally, in Holy Baptism God empowers each of us to decide to identify with HIS GOODNESS rather than LIFE'S BADNESS. In a world filled with so much pain and perversity, it becomes very difficult for each of us to celebrate this dimension of adoption. The hunger, the heartache and the hopelessness around us can so easily negate our willingness to keep on DREAMING A VISION OF GOD'S GOODNESS!

That was so classically illustrated by the three ladies who had arrived at the Pearly Gates for their interview with St. Peter. St. Peter had been detained by other pressing business, so the ladies had to patiently wait for his return. When he came back, he called the first lady and asked if she had minded waiting. "Oh no, Peter!" she responded, "I have been looking forward to this final oneness with God for so long that a few more minutes of waiting didn't matter."

"Very good," said Peter. One more question: How do you spell 'God?'" She responded: "Capital G-o-d" "Well done," said Peter, "please go right in."

Then Peter went to the second lady, again inviting her inside and asking: "Did you mind the wait?" She responded: "By no means! I've been a Christian for seventy years; how could I mind waiting a mere fifteen more minutes. I've been looking forward to this moment forever!!

Peter responded, "Very good. Just one more thing: How do you spell 'God?'" She said: "G-o-d. No, I mean capital G!" "Outstanding!" said Peter, "enter into the mansion prepared for you!

He went back for the third lady and again asked her if she minded waiting for him.

She huffily retorted: Minded!? "You bet I minded! I've had to stand in line all my life -- at the supermarket, when I went to school, at the doctor's office, when I went to the movies, at the city morgue, ... I was even delayed at my own funeral by another procession at the cemetery. Everywhere I've had to wait for somebody else ... and I resent having to wait in line for Heaven!"

"Well," said Peter, "I am sorry for your struggles but grateful for your honest feelings. Be assured, it won't be held against you. I have only one simple question for you: How do you spell 'Czechoslovakia?'"

Like this third woman, some people just never seem to possess the true spirit of God. From beginning to end, their lives become a recitation of all the bad news and they never seem to experience God's goodness. Even when they're at the very pinnacle of receiving God's greatest gift of love, all they can think about is complaining and categorizing all of life's hurts and heartaches.

Through adoption in Holy Baptism, God has empowered us to DREAM A DIFFERENT DREAM ... his impossible dream of grace and gratitude for the goodness of his everlasting love. As Bishop Rave asked a few years ago - why are Christians so much more willing to celebrate Christmas than Epiphany?? Then he answered: "Because Christmas lets us hold the baby ... and Epiphany urges us to share the baby with others. And selfish as we are - we want to clutch babies for ourselves ... to keep the new life for ourselves rather than giving it away to others!" But not so for those who have really been adopted to dream God's vision for life.

As Howard Thurmond says in "The Work of Christmas,"

When the song of the angels is silent,  
When the star in the sky has gone down,  
When the shepherds are again tending their sheep,  
When the manger is darkened and still ...

Then begins the Work of Christmas:

To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among ALL peoples,  
To befriend the lonely,  
To release the prisoner,  
To make real Xmas music in our hearts.

TO DREAM GOD'S IMPOSSIBLE DREAM ... for this is our quest, to follow his star ... no matter how hopeless, no matter how far ... to fight for the right, without question or pause ... to be willing to march into hell, for none other than his heavenly cause. AMEN.

EPIPHANY I (Baptism of our Lord)  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
January 9, 1994  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"EVERLASTING AFFIRMATIVE-ACTION!"

Isaiah proclaims: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to all nations." 42:1

And Peter spoke, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but for all people anyone who respects him and does what is right is acceptable to him. Acts 10:34

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Beloved Son, with you, I am well pleased." Mark 1:11

For those of you who know my weaknesses, you are aware that I have sometimes struggled with today's political correctness of AFFIRMATIVE ACTION. Part of that comes from the failure of any new system that thinks it can totally cure or overcome the EXISTING ABUSES of a previous system. Certainly, everyone has to admit that there have always been EXISTING ABUSES when it comes to affirming people for their gifts. Just in the church alone, if you are an ordained male pastor you are treated with more reverence & respect than as an ordained or unordained female. I hardly need state again that our DCE Debbie is as crucial and vital to our program of ministry as we three pastors -- yet she is often overlooked by members as well as the whole church when it comes to AUTHENTIC AFFIRMATION. Many times the church doesn't even include her on vital mailing lists. Likewise, to be a WOMAN OR MINORITY in the church means that you will be the target of many more expressions of verbal & sexual harrassment than if you are male or white. Moreover, again in the church, there are very few women or minorities who have been called to senior pastorates or to serve as bishops. In short, you don't have to look very far to see that even the church has a poor track record of affirmative action.

But even as I uplift the church for not affirming people for their gifts, the church has also offered AFFIRMATIVE ACTION for those who really possess very limited gifts. For instance, serving 25 years as a white, male pastor today means almost nothing when it comes to a host of positions and national elections in the church. Church slates & positions have become dominated by minorities and inexperienced female pastors. But this is hardly the story of Affirmative Action in the church alone. It is even more rampantly the story in business. I have heard countless examples of legislated equality which have seriously eroded the quality of hundreds of business & educational institutions. Because of Affirmative-Action, we all live in fear of calling the cards the way we really see them. Affirmative-Action has too often caused some people to feel that they deserve to be handed every benefit of life on a platter -- whether that be free medical attention or employment possibilities for which they are not truly qualified. Needless to say - I realize these words are not politically correct... but I think our culture periodically needs a little incarnation of grace & truth.

Yes, all of these abuses in Affirmative-Action make crystal clear that there MUST BE a better model for AFFIRMING PEOPLE WITH JUSTICE & EQUITY. And thankfully that example of affirmative-action has actually achieved its intended goal of justice, righteousness & equality: namely THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY BAPTISM. Holy Baptism is God's model of Everlasting Affirmative-Action. In Holy Baptism, God communicates three dimensions of affirmation that are absolutely crucial to every human life.

First and foremost, as communicated by Isaiah, "Behold my servant, my chosen, in whom my soul delights:" IN HOLY BAPTISM GOD CHOOSES US. There is nothing more crucial to the human psyche than being CHOSEN. Every one of us wants to be chosen by others to be a playmate, a friend, a teammate, a lover, a companion, a person who can be trusted and respected. Being THE CHOSEN ONE is a lifetime ambition of every person in this room. Just ask Bill Lenz how he now feels since he was a CHOSEN ONE for lung surgery 12 days ago. We wonder why there is so much emotionalism surrounding the health care issue. Well dear friends, which one of us wants to be the REJECTED ONE when it comes to our future physical health? There's reasons for BOTH physicians and patients to have real concerns about the future of health care--BECAUSE EVERYONE WANTS TO BE A CHOSEN ONE/HEALTH CARE.

And maybe when we see the issue of Affirmative-Action thru health care lenses we can better understand why minorities and women get upset when they are REJECTED without sufficient cause. No one wants to be a REJECTED ONE simply because of color or "dress" code. That's why God in his infinite wisdom has commanded that ALL BE BAPTIZED --because he wants every human being to have the psychological assurance that he/she is among the CHOSEN ONES. One of my dear friends commented on these texts by saying that Holy Baptism is God's vehicle of self-esteem: it's the way God assures us that we have his identity and purpose, that we have his worth and that we see ourselves as SOMEBODIES RATHER THAN NOBODIES. In Holy Baptism, we are affirmed with the same compassion, the same devotion, the same loving care and consecration by God. We do not choose God; in his infinite and gracious wisdom, HE CHOOSES US so that we might always know that WE BELONG, WE ARE FOREVER ON HIS TEAM. Self-esteem does not come from who we are or what we are, but from WHOSE WE ARE AND WHAT WE CAN BECOME. In Baptism, God adopts us to BECOME HIS EVERLASTING SOMEBODIES in this world.

So - ONCE CHOSEN, then what? Peter beautifully summarizes God's second dimension of Affirmative-Action: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but among every people anyone who fears him and does his will is acceptable to him." Friday night on "Picket Fences," the eight-yr-old son of the focus family declared that he wanted to convert from Congregationalism to Judaism. When his police-chief father and surgeon-mother pressed him on the reason for conversion he could only say that "he wanted to become a Jew 'cause Jews don't go to hell!" How is it that

we Christians have been so effective in communicating the contrary? Why do so many Christians feel so "UNACCEPTABLE" in the presence of God? Why do we hang our heads as Xans in God's presence when we should be beaming with joy? Why has so much Christian preaching and even every-day talk been so fixated on "judgment and condemnation?" How can so many Christians know John 3:16-17 and still miss the whole message of the gospel: "God so LOVED the WORLD that he GAVE his only begotten son that WHOSOEVER believes in him SHOULD NOT PERISH but have EVERLASTING LIFE. For this son came into the world NOT TO CONDEMN ANYONE, but that the world might be SAVED THRU HIM!" How can anyone really know these powerful verses and still proclaim that God's intention is that people will go to hell!?!

Let me say it one more time PLAIN & SIMPLE: GOD CHOOSES US EVEN WHEN WE HAVE SOMETIMES NOT CHOSEN HIM ... EVEN WHEN WE HAVE FALLEN SHORT OF HIS GLORY!! That's why Jesus came into this world and died for us -- to give us grace and hope even when we have sometimes been blinded by our own sinful and unclean lifestyles. God has nothing to do with CREATING HELL! Hell has always been the creation of fallen angels ... that means "hell" is a creation of those who DEFY & REJECT GOD'S CHOICE OF GOODNESS, TRUTH & JUSTICE. The man who beat Nancy Kerrigan on her kneecap at Cobo Arena on Thursday afternoon is a CREATOR OF HELL in this world. The people who slander minorities and abuse women & children are the CREATORS OF HELL here and everywhere. The ones who propogate the gods of pornography and gratification of the self are the CREATORS OF HELL on this earth. Contrary to all these fallen angels - God chooses EVERLASTING AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: he shows no partiality but declares all persons acceptable who repent and return to Him, the Father. In Holy Baptism, God has put out his EVERLASTING WELCOME MAT to anyone who chooses his kingdom of peace & justice over the world's obsession with hell, damnation & judgmentalism!

So, that leaves only one final dimension of God's model of EVERLASTING AFFIRMATIVE-ACTION: TO BE PLEASING TO THE ONE WHO HAS CHOSEN & ACCEPTED US IN THE FIRST PLACE. Unlike the political models of affirmative-action in this world, God does not merely affirm mediocrity and then let his chosen ones to continue to live by such impoverished quality. Since he has first graced us with his everlasting power of peace, he has gracious expectations for each of us. God "was pleased" with Jesus because he already knew that Jesus would fulfill his gracious expectations. God is pleased with us in BAPTISM for the same reason: WE MAKE A PROMISE IN BAPTISM TO PLEASE HIM - TO LIVE BY & FULFILL HIS EXPECTATIONS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS!

To receive AFFIRMATION-ACTION from God means that he chooses us for a Godly purpose: to be His power of light in this world; to bring forth his justice to all peoples, to offer His peace & hope to anyone held captive by all unjust forms of incarceration in our society. In Holy Baptism, we become God's hands & hearts to wipe away that which has made us captive or fearful ... whether thse powers be guns or

materialism or immorality or anything else that has made us prisoners to prejudice or paranoia. In Holy Baptism, we have received God's light in contrast to the darkness of the powers of damnation in this world. Unlike the legislative model of this world, it is not merely a matter of abiding by the law to live by the Affirmative Action of God. It is a matter of the heart - a matter of being consecrated to a love which will make a long-term difference in this world.

Holy Baptism has very little to do with the style of baptistry or the amount of water or whether we sprinkle or immerse. All of these matters are the ridiculous things that pious liturgists argue over and thereby divert our attention from the real sacrament. In Holy Baptism, every member of every family becomes "sacramental" -- becomes a sign of God's love for everyone else in this world. In Holy Baptism, God is pleased when we offer his everlasting affirmative action to others ... when we choose to love & accept by His grace, not when we choose to live by what is merely politically correct.

Dr. Hendrick Kramer, after returning to Germany from missionary work in Holland in the early 40's, was confronted with this real meaning of Baptism. Nazis were over-running his country and arresting both Jews & Christians for their concentration camps. Late one night, a group of likeminded resistors slipped into Kramer's house and pleaded: "Tell us, Doctor, what to do, our Jewish neighbors are being dragged out of their homes and off to gas chambers."

Kramer was silent for a long time. Then he spoke this baptismal covenant: "I cannot tell you what to do, I can only tell you whose you are. And once you know whose you are, then you will know what do to!" In Holy Batpism, God has offered us his EVERLASTING AFFIRMATIVE-ACTION: we know whose we are and we know we are acceptalbe to Him by his grace! Once we know whose we are, then we know what to do -- TO LIVE OUR LIVES PLEASING HIM!! There is no greater or more lasting affirmative action!!

AMEN.

*Baptism of our Lord (Epiphany I)*  
*Glenwood Lutheran & Sunset House*  
*January 11, 1998*  
*Peter R. Martyn, Presiding Pastor & Chaplain*

## **“BECOMING FULLY IMMERSED!”**

*“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. Isaiah 43:1a-2a ‘You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’ Luke 3:22b*

In southern Mississippi, there’s a Baptist minister who preached every Sunday on “baptism by immersion.” His flock agreed with the practice, but they were tired of hearing the same subject week after week. The deacons decided to resolve the situation diplomatically (right?!). They complimented him on his superior pulpit skills! And because of these great skills, they wanted to try an experiment with him. They would hand him a note with a scripture text on it just before he entered the pulpit; and he would expound upon it that day. Obviously, this preacher was so good he didn’t even need sermon prep-time.

Since you all know that preachers are vulnerable to having their egos stroked, he obviously took the bait. With much searching - the deacons finally found a text with no reference to water, rivers or streams: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” [Gen. 1] Certainly there was no text more grounded in solid earth.

Sunday morning came. They handed the minister the text; he pondered it thoughtfully for a few moments; then he turned to the congregation and said, “Today’s text is from Gen. 1 -- ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ Now if I remember my geography right - the earth is approx. 1/4 land ... and 3/4 water. And that brings me to my subject for the day -- ‘Baptism by Immersion!’”

Thankfully, we get weekly “grace in this place,” but very little “baptism by immersion.” But there are many times I wished we used “immersion” rather than “sprinkling.” Obviously - the method is not more important than the meaning ... but IMMERSION is so much more symbolic of baptism. It better conveys the “drowning of the old” and the “rising up of the new” -- cleansed, drenched, and dripping with the power of God.

Well, obviously this first Sunday after Epiphany always celebrates the baptism of our Lord. So let’s pause briefly and ask: what does Baptism have to do with God?? Or what can we learn about God from baptism? First we learn that He fully identifies with us. As St. Paul says, “He who had no sin became sin for our sake.” Stated differently, in baptism God FULLY IMMERSSES HIMSELF in our human pain & suffering. As scripture often states, “Jesus was not OF the world, but he was fully IN the world;” he related to lepers & prostitutes & tax collectors & hypocrites & pharisees. Jesus related to people like you and me ... to show that his aim was to transform us from whatever we had made or were making into gods that weren’t worthy of any praise and honor.

Unlike many other religions - Christianity's emphasis upon baptism does not show us a god who stands far away from us touting us with his perfection and purity. Instead, as we celebrated at Christmas ... our God remains very much with us. He first fulfills the righteousness that he asks from us: he allows himself to be cleansed (even though he is perfectly clean) to again assure us that he is **ONE WITH US!** In baptism, God comes to us to understand & transform our struggles, our selfish uncertainties and our tendency toward waywardness. Jesus Christ becomes fully immersed in our sin in order that we might become fully immersed in his grace, justice and truth. So it is that God always takes the initiative in Baptism -- He chooses to adopt us, even though we remain dirty, defiant and unworthy of adoption.

So - there you have God's side of the equation. Now what does baptism mean for you and me?? Well, first as Martin Luther always said, it means "death by drowning." Especially in the practice of immersion - the water washes over a person symbolizing a suffocation of sin. That imagery was deeply apparent in the current movie rage, *Titanic*. Like the flood in Genesis, hundreds of people foolishly drown in this movie. And the moral of both stories is that these tragedies were caused by greed, stupidity and the arrogance of people who wanted to make names for themselves ... rather than really caring for all God's children.

But *Titanic* goes even farther. The male lead, Jack Dawson, is a free-spirited artist from Wisconsin. The female lead, Rose, is an English aristocrat totally bound by the traditions of superficial society. They beautifully illustrate how God's baptismal spirit works. Jack represents God's spirit of forgiving grace and compassion -- a power which ultimately frees Rose from her sinfully greedy and narrow, aristocratic racism. By the end of *Titanic* - everyone knows the meaning of "dying to the old ways of greed & arrogance & human narrowness." As an old saying goes: in order for God's renewed spirit to appear, the old house must first burn down. So it is that Jesus' spirit comes as fire to burn down the old chaff.

But baptism for us is NOT ONLY "dying to the old," it is "rising up fully cleansed and empowered by the new" -- that is, "BECOMING FULLY IMMERSSED with the healing power of Christ for a suffering world." Matthew's gospel most clearly defines these dimensions of baptismal commitment: "Go therefore to all nations ... baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... teaching whatsoever I have commanded you." God wants his forgiving spirit of gracious love to BECOME FULLY IMMERSSED in ALL the hearts and ALL the minds of ALL the persons in this world!

Salvador Dali, a modern artist, most graphically conveys that baptismal spirit of God for the world. Unlike many renditions of the *Last Supper* -- Dali's does not seek to capture facts and historical detail. Jesus is blond and blue-eyed and almost transparent. The table barely reflects a Passover supper. The painting pleads for our attention to its background ... where we see the movement of lakes and mountains fading in and out of the room. Roof beams can be seen - yet the room appears to have no ceiling or walls. Dali's message is classically biblical:

**"Christ is FULLY IMMERSED in the world ... and the world is FULLY IMMERSED in Christ and his followers.**

Putting this picture into today's baptismal framework says: ***"God's intention for His spirit in baptism is too big to be contained in walls, traditions, or any other human doctrines."*** Or said differently - doctrines, traditions and walls have a very diluting effect upon the baptismal spirit of our Lord. Jesus Christ did not do his ministry within walls or parochial houses of worship. He became **FULLY IMMERSED** in the world around him and the problems people were having in that world. So - congregations in those early centuries had no doctrines or walls to narrow their mission & outreach. **The mission of Jesus Christ and its oneness in baptism has always been OUTWARD to a world in need, NOT INWARD to our own parochial needs.**

Too often throughout the history of God's people -- churches have established doctrines and buildings **not only to keep out the cold ... but to keep out the sinful of the world.** As we have learned today -- God **BECAME FULLY IMMERSED** in human suffering in order that his baptized and redeemed disciples would live in his image. God help the church and its people when it only ministers to those "inside its walls and doctrinal boundaries." God has chosen all sinners to be redeemed by his baptismal spirit. That's why even the prophet could say, **"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, called you by name and you are mine!"** If we chose any less than God has chosen -- then we will be a mere sprinkling rather than a **FULL IMMERSION** of God's forgiving spirit for the world.

The decision is ours. God chose Jesus from the beginning and already knew that Jesus would fulfill the image of his spirit when he said to Jesus, **"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."** Likewise, in baptism, God has already chosen and adopted us. He wants to say the same for every one of us that he said for his Only Son, Jesus. But **BECOMING FULLY IMMERSED** means that like Jesus, we are willing to die to our own greed and selfishness. In two weeks -- this congregation and many others will be ratifying 1998 budgets. Those budgets are one of the ways that every congregation reflects whether it is **BECOMING FULLY IMMERSED** in Jesus Christ ... or continuing to be a mere sprinkling of his spirit. **I am praying that on January 25th ... Glenwood Lutheran will hear a voice from heaven saying: "You are my beloved sons & daughters; with you I am well pleased."**

AMEN.