

Rev. Shaun Arndt
Sunday, January 14, 2024
Epiphany 1—The Baptism of Our Lord Isaiah 49:1-6

“I am Here to Serve”

*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!
And that is what we are! Amen.*

Dear Friends in Christ...

It happens so quickly. A few splashes of water. Some spoken words. But what does it mean? God’s Word explains: In Baptism, God puts His Name upon you, adopts you into His family, washes away sin and connects you to all the fruits of Jesus’ death and resurrection!

It happens so quickly. Just three short verses in today’s Gospel speak about Jesus’ baptism where the Spirit descends and the Father speaks. But what does it all mean?

God’s Word from our first lesson today helps explain what Jesus’ baptism is all about, when He was anointed and acclaimed as the promised Messiah. Three times our lesson declares He has come to be the Lord’s **Servant**. Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River was essentially Christ saying: **I am here to serve!**

Although Isaiah 49 was written 700 years before Jesus stood on the Jordan River, yet through it He is directly addressing us, telling us about a conversation between the Father and Himself.

The LORD called me from the womb. When I was inside my mother, he mentioned my name. We see these words fulfilled in the events leading up to Jesus’ birth. God’s angel announced how Mary’s miracle child was to be named **Jesus**, because He was the long-promised **Savior King**.

I will appoint you to be a light for the nations, so that my salvation will be known to the end of the earth. Again, this is clearly talking about Jesus. He is the **Light of the world** (Jn 8:12) -- *Light from Light, True God from true God*. After His Resurrection, Jesus sent His disciples to proclaim His saving message **to all nations** (Lk 24, Acts 1).

He made my mouth like a sharpened sword. Even these words aren’t hard to understand when we remember God’s Word is called the **Sword of the Spirit** (Eph. 6). As true God in our flesh and blood, Jesus speaks the Word of God that cuts through all lies.

Then we hear this: **He said to me, “You are my servant Israel... so that Israel might be gathered... to restore the ones I have preserved in Israel.** Wait? So, Jesus is both **Israel** and the One who rescues **Israel**? Yes, because Jesus came to take the place of Israel, to rescue the people of Israel.

The more you know the Old Testament, the more you can understand why this was needed. Name any famous Israelite of old and you name a sinner filled with flaws: Abraham lied. Rebekah schemed. Moses was reluctant. Gideon doubted. David fell to lust and murder. Elijah despaired. Hezekiah was prideful. God spoke and Jonah did the very opposite!

As a nation, Israel constantly forgot God’s goodness, neglected His Word and ran after idols, power, wealth, things that are not God.

So God sent Jesus as the perfect **Israel** to take Israel’s place and do everything they did not do. Jesus came serving God with perfect love, trust, obedience in heart and life.

So, when Jesus stood in the Jordan River it was as if to say: **I am here to serve** – to give my life of perfection for them. And the Father smiled with approval on Jesus’ sinless life: **I am well pleased with you** (Mk 1:11).

Since every sin of every Israelite earned death and hell, Jesus also came to do what was needed to **raise up... the tribes of Jacob.**

The Bible tells us baptism is for sinners. But Jesus had no sin. Well, no sin of His own. By standing in the Jordan River He was saying **I am here to serve**, I take their sins upon myself to pay for them in full. It’s as though when Jesus stood on the bank of the Jordan, He was staring straight ahead to the cross.

But thank God it wasn’t just for Israel that Jesus came to **serve** as the **Savior**. Since most of us are not descended from **Israel**, thank God for these words: **Pay attention, you faraway peoples!** Sun Prairie is indeed **faraway** from Jerusalem!

The LORD said: It is too small a thing that you should just be my servant to raise up only the tribes of Jacob... so I will appoint you to be a light for the nations, so that my salvation will be known to the end of the earth.

Praise God, Jesus is the **Servant** Savior not just for Israel, but for all **nations...** for Europeans, Americans, Africans, Asians and Australians!

We desperately need this good news! Though we do not share ancestry with ancient Israel, we certainly share in their sins. We have hearts that have gone astray from the very beginning of life in our mothers’ wombs.

Therefore, like Israel of old, we also can be so quick to forget how good God is to us every day. Our sinful hearts constantly want us to chase after idols and serve the false gods of self, reason, pride, money, activities, power, pleasure.

Our lips have spoken lies. Our ears have listened to gossip. Our hearts have doubted. Our eyes have looked at what we should not. How often God speaks to us in His commandments, but like Jonah we run in the opposite direction.

Like Israel of old, we have failed to give God the love and obedience He deserves. Ruin, death and judgment is our rightful lot not just for this life, but the life to come with no way out ever.

Like Israel, we could never save ourselves. Therefore, **listen to** and **pay attention** to the only way out, the rescue God gives us: **I will appoint you (Jesus) to be a light for the nations, so that my salvation will be known to the end of the earth.**

Jesus stood in the Jordan River to be the perfect **Servant** of God not just for Israel. He did it for you. He did it for me. Like **a polished arrow** Christ hit the bullseye of perfect love, trust and obedience and counts His record as your own.

Only Jesus deserved to hear the Father say: **I am well pleased with you.** But so that He could say the same of you and me, Jesus suffered everything that we deserved. That's why in our lesson of He speaks of **spending (his) strength** and suffering as He was rejected by His own people.

Jesus suffered depths we could never understand when He took on Himself the hell our sins earned as He hung on the cross. All this He did for you and for me. So that no matter who our ancestors are, no matter how awful our own past and how messy our present, Jesus came to pay for it all and save us from it all!

By His birth in Bethlehem, by His coming to the Jordan to be baptized, by His hanging from the cross and rising on Easter morning Jesus says to us: **I am here to serve** and save **you!**

Let us never take for granted this amazing love or be ho-hum toward it! This is all shockingly upside down! He is the Almighty God, the King of kings and yet He comes to **serve** us helpless, hopeless sinners, just as He would later say: **The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**" (Mark 10:45)

I am here to serve. Jesus said it in our reading. He said it by His actions in the Jordan. He said it in Galilee. And then He said it directly to you as an individual at the baptismal font, when the Triune God claimed you as His own. In water and Word, Christ Himself was present to join us to His death on the cross and His glorious rising from the dead, just as we heard in Romans 6.

That means in your baptism, Jesus says to you: **I am here to serve you...** to wash your sins away, to clothe you with perfection, to give you new life to live as God's child and to bring you to the never-ending joys of life with me with me in the world to come!

And still Jesus says **I am here to serve** in every worship service. Here we live out our baptisms as with Spirit given faith, we confess our sins and trust that Jesus speaks forgiveness to us through the lips of the minister.

Jesus serves us with His Word read, spoken, sung and remembered. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus serves us with the very same body and blood that was baptized in the Jordan River and given upon the cross to save the world.

This is why we call it a worship *service*, because here the Lord Himself comes to **serve** us with Word and Sacrament.

Yes, the Lord says to us: **Here I am to serve.**

We who have been **saved** by His undeserved grace, we who are served by His never-failing promises, we who have been joined to Christ in Baptism with power from Him to live a new life— we cannot help but respond to His goodness by also saying: **Here I am to serve, Lord. Here I am to serve** as you lead me to repent of my sin, obey your Word and love and serve my neighbor and work to carry your saving message out **to the ends of the earth.**

Lord, lead us to always be your servants, because you have served and saved us. Amen.

Since we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. Consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Amen.