



Liturgical Day: The Baptism of Our Lord
Date: January 9, 2005
Title: A Theology of the Cross

Have you, like me, been absolutely horrified by the pictures coming out of south Asia these days? The force of those waves and tides. Water-born furniture and landscaping and automobiles and human bodies crashing against one another. The desperate cries of those who were being overcome. The grief-stricken expressions on the faces of parents whose children were gone in an instant. It has been horrifying to look at these pictures.

It is hard to believe that the forces of this earth are capable of such destruction. We live far from the San Andreas fault. We shovel snow from time to time, all the while knowing that we'll be bicycling and golfing within the month. We hear the rattle of hail on the roofs, and wonder if the insurance company will cover all or part of the repairs. The occasional tornado makes its way through our state, but rarely hits home. Nature affects us here in Colorado – but it is more a nuisance than a danger.

Perhaps that is why it is so horrifying to view these pictures. We like to think that we've tamed nature. With air conditioners and reliable automobiles and hi-tech clothing, we travel about in the worst of what Colorado has to offer, and find ourselves relatively safe and comfortable. Pictures like the ones we're seeing these days are a reminder that in the natural world, chaos continues to be present. The earth doesn't always lay still. The waters don't always stay in place. And people are hurt. Terribly, horribly hurt. The few stories of survival are hardly enough to keep at bay the image of broken bodies, and grieving parents.

I've been troubled by these images – and I've also been troubled by the many stories I've heard of those whose faith in God has suffered during these times. Many people through the world are asking hard questions these days. Some of them are people of faith. Some of them are simply curious about the faith. Some of them have rejected the faith. But with one voice they ask: "Where is God in all of this?" "How can anyone continue to believe in the presence of a good God, when something so horrible can take place?" "Why didn't God stop the tsunami?" "Why didn't God speak in a dream, to the people of Indonesia and Sri Lanka and Thailand and Malaysia, telling them (as God once told Joseph) to flee and save their families?"

These are fair questions. These are good questions. These are important questions. They are questions that we dare not take lightly, because our approach to them will say much to others about the faith that guides us. And so I want to wrestle honestly with them today. I want to ask: "Where has God been in the past two weeks?" I want to ask: "How do we understand God's presence in the midst of this horrific suffering?"

But even as I want to take these questions seriously, I am convinced that they are based on a misunderstanding of God's nature. You see, there is an assumption that lies behind each of these questions, and the assumption is this: that it is God's nature to rescue people from the pain of living in this world. Or perhaps even more offensively: that it is God's nature to rescue *faithful* people from the pain of living in this world.

Let me be clear: I don't believe that. I don't believe that God arbitrarily decides who will suffer in this world and who won't. Genesis three teaches us that we live in a world that is not entirely under our God's control. In this world, you and I are free to act in ways that are godly or ungodly. In this world, the forces of nature can touch us in ways that please God and in ways that horrify God. In this world, there is a fierce opponent of God, whose powers cause unknown pain and suffering. God has not removed us from this reality. But God has given us a promise: the promise that no

FIRST LESSON

ISAIAH 42:1-9

PSALM

PSALM 29

SECOND LESSON

ACTS 10:34-43

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. MATTHEW 3:13-17

PRAYER OF THE DAY

FATHER IN HEAVEN, AT THE BAPTISM OF JESUS IN THE RIVER JORDAN YOU PROCLAIMED HIM YOUR BELOVED SON AND ANOINTED HIM WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT. MAKE ALL WHO ARE BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST FAITHFUL IN THEIR CALLING TO BE YOUR CHILDREN AND INHERITORS WITH HIM OF EVERLASTING LIFE; THROUGH YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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matter what the world has to offer up to us, we will never face it alone. Even in the depths of the valley of the shadow of death, we need not live in fear because God promise to be with us. To be our comfort and our strength. To empower us to do what we could never attempt on our own. To give us a reason to live, even when every other reason is taken away.

If you want to deal with this in theological terms, what we are talking about is the difference between a *Theology of Glory* and a *Theology of the Cross*. Martin Luther wrote and talked much about this distinction in his day. It is one of the precious treasures of our Lutheran tradition. But sadly, it is a concept that is known by relatively few today.

A Theology of Glory is one that puts God at our service. God is the one who answers our needs; who ensures our success; who gives us an advantage when we find ourselves competing head-to-head with an unbeliever. Whatever troubles us in life, God is proposed as the answer: believe and you will succeed in business, your family life will be more fulfilling, your health will be stronger, you will be admired by many. In this theology, God is the source of glory – and the glory is given to us as a reward for believing.

This kind of thinking is quite popular in Christian circles today. You hear this message preached more often than not when you turn on the television or the radio late at night. It is not uncommon to see broadcasters in lavish settings, surrounded by fine artwork, priceless furniture, and expansive chandeliers – all implying that if we believe in Christ, then we'll be as rich and as successful and as handsome and as happy as they are. That is a theology of glory, and one that Luther and the reformers rejected out of hand.

He embraced, instead, a theology of the cross, which professes that God is known most powerfully in our greatest hour of need. When we have lost hope; when we are utterly broken; when we are facing insurmountable odds; it is then that God comes to us, bringing us comfort and strength and hope and peace. Why is that? Well, simply, it is because our God is one who knows what that is like. God knows what it is like to be tortured to death. God knows what it is like to see a beloved son die a horrible death. God knows what it is like to feel grief that tears your very heart from your chest. And because God knows and understands that kind of pain, God is able to reach into those moments of our lives and make a difference.

And so where was God on December 26th as the waters of the Tsunami devastated South Asia? God was in the midst of the terror, embracing and gracing those who clung for life, even as the waves tore them away; those who tried in vain to pull the struggling back to safety; those whose hearts had been broken by the horrors that surrounded them. And where is God now? God continues to be in the midst of that terror, working through compassionate people who can do no other than reach out and seek to help these wounded people put their lives back together. God continues to be present through organizations like our own Lutheran World Relief – named on NBC as one of the four most efficient disaster relief agencies in the whole country. God continues to be present through contributions that you and I make to fund the work of LWR and other relief agencies. A theology of the cross admits that there are realities in this broken world that cause events to take place that grieve God's heart as deeply as they grieve ours. But it also understands the power of God that moves in those kinds of moments to bring life and healing in an otherwise desperate situation.

In a sermon that one of our members forwarded to me this past week, Pastor Nathan Nettleton shared this quote with his congregation:

*Any theology that can't be preached in the presence of parents grieving over their slaughtered children isn't worth preaching anywhere else either.*ⁱ

I don't know a lot about this pastor, but I know this: he understands Luther's theology of the cross. He understands what it means to refrain from glib answers that give false comfort. He understands what it means to proclaim that in the midst of the worst that this world can offer up, there is our God: bringing comfort and strength and hope and peace.

These days many are asking some powerfully important questions about our God. And you and I have a remarkable opportunity. We have the chance to proclaim the depths of God's grace. We have the chance to invite others to consider what a life lived in the shadow of our Lord's cross is like. We have the chance to offer a powerful word of hope, in a situation where many other words fall short. Our God does not manipulate the events of the world on a whim. But instead, is one who knows suffering, and enters into it with us – transforming our suffering into a sacred experience of God's grace and mercy.

This morning we are remembering the day when Jesus went out to be baptized by John. He entered into those waters, not because he had to – after all, we profess that Jesus is the one who has lived without sin, and he had no need for the repentance that John proclaimed – no, Jesus entered into those waters because he wanted to be fully immersed in our life. To know us. To love us. To save us. To welcome us into God's eternity. Perhaps that stands as a helpful metaphor today for our God, who enters into the chaos of our lives, bringing us the comfort and strength and hope and peace we need to move faithfully through whatever the world throws our way.

None of us are facing the terrors of Tsunami destruction today, and for that we are grateful. But each of us has our own burden to bear. God promises to be with us in the midst of carrying those burdens, just as God is with the people in South Asia who are struggling to put their world back together again. God is one who understands our pain, and who provides the strength and courage to continue on faithfully. May that power of God be with all who suffer from the effects of this natural disaster, and all who seek to minister with them. May that power of God be with us as well, in our every time of need.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (January 8, 2005)

English Text: ⁱⁱ

^{3.13} Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." ⁱⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

^{3.13} Τότε παραγίνεται ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰορδάνην πρὸς τὸν Ἰωάννην τοῦ βαπτισθῆναι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ. ¹⁴ ὁ δὲ Ἰωάννης διεκώλυεν αὐτὸν λέγων· ἐγὼ χρεῖαν ἔχω ὑπὸ σοῦ βαπτισθῆναι, καὶ σὺ ἔρχῃ πρὸς με; ¹⁵ ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν· ἄφες ἄρτι, οὕτως γὰρ πρέπον ἐστὶν ἡμῖν πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην. τότε ἀφίησιν αὐτόν. ¹⁶ βαπτισθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εὐθὺς ἀνέβη ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕδατος· καὶ ἰδοὺ ἤνεώχθησαν [αὐτῷ] οἱ οὐρανοί, καὶ εἶδεν [τὸ] πνεῦμα [τοῦ] θεοῦ καταβαίνον ὡσεὶ περιστερὰν [καὶ] ἐρχόμενον ἐπ' αὐτόν· ¹⁷ καὶ ἰδοὺ φωνὴ ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν λέγουσα· οὗτος ἐστὶν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα. ^{iv}

ⁱ From a sermon by Pastor Nathan Nettleton on January 2, 2005, in response to the South Asia Tsunami disaster. Pastor Nettleton serves the South Yarra Community Baptist Church in Melbourne, Australia, a small congregation located on the edge of a large public housing estate in the middle of what is otherwise one of the wealthiest areas of the city of Melbourne, Australia. He also teaches liturgical studies at Whitley College, the Baptist Theological College of Victoria. In this brief excerpt, he quotes Australian church leader Athol Gill.

ⁱⁱ Link to: http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/year_c.html for a listing of Bible lessons for the coming weeks.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Matthew 3:13-17, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^{iv} St. Matthew 3:13-17, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display correctly, choose Lucida Sans Unicode font.