

Baptism and Christmas
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
January 9, 2022 – PM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Isaiah 59:20-60:6

Tonight's service traditionally marks the end of our Christmas celebrations. For as long as I've been around this place, on the first evening service of January, we have a candlelight service. The lights are lit on the aisles, and at the service's end we light candles in the pew as a celebration of our hope. It's a lovely service. We don't typically have a baptism at this service. That's unusual. And I will admit that the reason we scheduled a baptism tonight is that it was one of the only dates that worked for everyone involved.

But this week as the service approached and I reflected on these two things scheduled together, it seems to me that this is providential. There is something fitting about the pairing of baptism and Christmas. It seems to me that some of the things we celebrate and remember at Christmas are exactly the same things we celebrate and remember at a baptism.

The text for tonight's sermon is based on a passage that we read every single candlelight service. We always read the beginning of Isaiah 60 because it has those familiar words where the prophet tells us, "Arise, shine for your light has come. Thick darkness covers the people, but light will shine on you." Those are perfect words for a candlelight service. Tonight I will read those words, but I will also back up a little bit to show you what leads up to those words and that will help you make the baptism connection.

There are at least two ways in which Christmas and baptism go together. First Christmas and baptism go together because they are both about God's faithfulness to his covenant promises. Christmas and baptism both say to us, "God's promises do not fail!"

I think you probably know that this part of Isaiah is addressed to the people of Judah while they are in exile in Babylon. For 70 years, from 587 BC to 517 BC or so, all God's people were forcibly kept in Babylon. They saw their cities burned and looted, and then they were brought to a strange country where they were used as cheap labor. It was one long humiliation. And for 70 years their way of life seemed like it was dying. Many people left the faith. There was daily pressure to assimilate into the ways of Babylon. If you would just stop worshipping Yahweh the God of Israel, if you would just stop with the kosher and the Sabbath, if you would just get on board with the Babylonian program, you could expect a rise in your standard of living. So some people just gave up on the promise. And, even those who remained faithful sometimes felt as though faith was pointless. If you don't believe me, go back and read some of the Psalms written during this period. They are full of disappointment and questions. Because things just didn't seem to be going the way God said they would. In the old stories, God told Abraham that Israel would be special, that she would be great. God said the whole world would be blessed through them. And people celebrated those promises. "We are God's chosen people. His love goes with us! He will be faithful."

During the time of King David, when Israel was strong, when the pantry was full and the nations around Israel bowed the knee before Israel's power, those stories seemed totally believable. They were easy to tell. But in Babylon, not so much. Faithful Israelites still told their children about these promises, and they tried to sound confident, but every cultural sign seemed to deny their truth. Israel was not great, she was not strong, she was not pouring out blessings to the world, she was just trying to survive. It was, needless to say, a time of deep discouragement, deep disappointment. People were spiritually wounded.

Listen to Isaiah's words and you can hear him speaking to that discouragement, that wound. People my covenant still holds! The Redeemer will come to Zion! You will return to your land and the Spirit of the Lord will return to the temple! "As for me this is my covenant with you! My Spirit - who is in you - will not depart from your lips nor from the lips of your children, from this time forth and forever. The glory of the Lord will rise upon you!" "Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn!" God is faithful! Don't give up! Now, given the darkness that the people were in, given the circumstances of exile, I am sure that lots of people heard Isaiah's words and wondered how they could possibly be true. Surely Israel's story was done. Kings coming to bring tribute to Zion!? Nations streaming to the brightness of your dawn!? That seems about as likely as someone rising from the dead.

But we know how that story worked out, right. All Isaiah's promises came true. Darkness covered the world, and then Jesus was born and the light had come and the glory of the Lord rose over them. And the kings

came to the brightness of his dawn. They come bearing gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh. And pretty soon nations are coming to his light, the gospel spread all over the earth – the whole earth is blessed through Jesus. All through scripture, God says it again and again and again. ‘My covenant will not fail. My covenant is the driving force of history. My promises that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, and the lips of your children, and on the lips of their descendants. Trust me! Trust me! I am faithful.’

What Isaiah said to the exiles 2600 years ago, we said again at this font. ‘Bossenbroek family, you are covenant people. God’s promises are on you. God’s promises are on Maxima. God’s promises are strong. They will not fail!’

Now you Bossenbroeks are not in exile. Your situation is totally different from the situation of the people to whom Isaiah speaks. Your situation is more like Israel in the time of David. You are in a situation where the truth of God’s promise is relatively easy to believe. A beautiful young family. Prosperous. Healthy. Growing. God’s faithfulness is pretty close to the surface here. But I promise you there will be days that will feel more like exile. I don’t wish those days on you, but as Jesus said, in this world you will have trouble. There will be days when stuff happens that makes no sense. There will be times in Maxima’s life where stuff happens that makes no sense. On those days remember your baptism. Remember this font. Remember all those stories of God’s faithfulness, all those times the promise seemed dead, only to emerge stronger than ever. Remember all those times darkness seemed to be winning, and God burst through with light. Remember all those times the church seemed to be on the verge of collapse only to be revived by God’s Spirit. Remember God’s covenant faithfulness which is the true story of this world.

So...Christmas and baptism are both times when we remember the faithfulness of God’s covenant, we remember that we are the children of that covenant, and nothing can take us from the Father’s hand. Christmas and baptism also go together in that they are both occasions where we celebrate the joy and the importance of face to face community.

At Christmas we celebrate that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. At Christmas we celebrate the fact that God’s love is personal. It is a flesh and blood love. God is not content to rule us from above, sending us behavior memos. God is not content to send messengers like Isaiah who convey his instructions and his good will. At Christmas we see that God wanted to touch lepers, and he wanted to embrace children. God wanted to stand so close to the misery of a blind beggar that he could see his sores and smell his misery. God wanted to stand so close to human grief that his own heart convulsed and tears would stream down his face. God wanted to get so close to human sin and hatred that it could spit on him and hit him in the face, so that he could absorb it and carry it away. At Christmas, God’s love is not an abstraction. It weeps and bleeds and it never gives up.

Baptism also celebrates the face to face nature of God’s love. When Maxima was baptized she was baptized ‘into Christ.’ That means she becomes part of Christ’s body, his church. She is part of this community, this family. This family is the place where God chooses to make himself known to her. That’s why in part of the vows we make parents speak at baptism, the parents promise to raise their children in the fellowship of the church. “Do you promise to encourage and sustain them in the fellowship of believers?” We do, God helping us. Or as we said it tonight, “Do you promise to train her in Christ’s way through the nurture of the church?” We do, God helping us.

It’s the same truth we celebrate when we get up and recite the Apostles’ Creed and say together, “I believe in the communion of saints.” The church isn’t just a bunch of people who have the same beliefs; it is a family, a communion, a community of shared life. From birth to death we stick with each other, we weep together, we rejoice together, we hold each other accountable, we call each other out, we encourage each other along the narrow path. Both Christmas and Baptism emphasize the importance of face to face community.

I came across the quote from Martin Luther this week: “Therefore he who would find Christ must first find the Church. How should we know where Christ and his faith were, if we did not know where his believers are? And he who would know anything of Christ must not trust himself nor build a bridge to heaven by his own reason; but he must go to the Church, attend and ask her. Now the Church is not wood and stone, but the company of believing people; one must hold to them, and see how they believe, live and teach; they surely have Christ in their midst.” These people?! These people here?! This group?! Christ is here?! This is where God makes himself known? These people are the vessels of God’s glory, the place where his light shines?! Yes. These people. This ornery group. This beautiful family of God.

