

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 7 & 8, 2006
Sermon by Timothy A Leitzke

Think back to your weirdest childhood fear. Were you afraid of clowns, or dogs, or the air conditioner? Me? I was afraid that there were wolves living on the second floor of my house. Now, I had never personally seen a wolf, much less a wolf *in* my house, *and* I was convinced that the wolves would *not* come out if mom or dad were with me on the second floor. Also, the wolves could not come down the stairs. Did I *really* think that there were wolves on the second floor? No. I just knew I was afraid to be up there by myself and that this was a fear that made no sense so I invented the wolves. I didn't want to go any lower than the ground floor, though, because under the house it was all dirty and wet and the TV news was always talking about Radon, the silent killer that would creep stealthily into your house and throttle you in the night. The only place where I could safely go on my own was the ground floor of the house.

Our knowledge of the universe is far greater than mine was then, but we often visualize the universe as a three-story-house: hell, earth, & heaven. We speak of the dead as though they either burn below or, hopefully, look down on us from above. In heaven is God, who is so much stronger than we are, and in hell there is the Devil, who constantly tries to ruin our lives. The only place where we are safe is here on the ground floor, on earth. God is safely upstairs, the Devil is safely underfoot, and we can get on with our lives, safe from harm.

We set up the Church as a holy space, a place untouched by the outside world. We have a tendency to withdraw, to curl up inside our walls, safe from a scary world. The Church *needs* to be a safe community and the sanctuary *needs* to be a safe place. We *need* it as a place set apart where we can recharge. It's just that sometimes we get hung up on recharging.

On this, the first Sunday After the Epiphany, we celebrate The Baptism of Our Lord. It is a bit of an odd festival. In Mark's baptism story the three-story-house comes crashing down. First, John plunges Jesus into the dirty waters of the Jordan. (Our baptisms here at this font are sterile by comparison.) Jesus is safely under water. God is safely above the dome of heaven. We're safely in the middle. Everything is okay so far. Then, "straightaway, while Jesus was **coming up** he beheld the heavens **being ripped open** and the Spirit **coming down**." Jesus emerges from the muddy waters like a submarine blowing its tanks. The heavens are ripped like your favorite shirt being torn to shreds. The spirit descends like a tornado's funnel pouring out of the sky. If this is our three-story-house, someone just punched a pair of irreparable holes, one in the ceiling and one in the floor. In The Baptism of Our Lord our safe little structure is demolished. The heavens have been torn apart and God has plumbed the deeps. There is no sacred or profane; there is no heaven or hell; all is one, and God is in it, right here, right now, on the loose in this room, and at work in Jesus.

It's all centered in Jesus the Christ, this man who walks the earth, who works wonders, whom God raises from the dead. God is on the loose in our world

and things are going to get dirty. When little Tyler John is baptized here tomorrow/this morning he will be raised up a new person, he will be called Tyler John Child-of-God, and marked as God's own, and gifted with the promise of the forgiveness of sins and salvation into resurrection life, but he will be plunged into the waters of this broken world for God's work. He will be raised and sealed with the Spirit, and there will be no tidy boundaries in his world.

Friends of Christ, that is why we celebrate The Baptism of Our Lord. The waters are split, the heavens are sundered, and God is poured into this person, Jesus the Christ. In Christ God has united the entire universe—every planet, every star, every electron, every life, all that is, that has been, or ever shall be. As Christ was baptized so are we. We share this rite with him. We are united with Christ in baptism. We are plunged into the waters of this broken world and sealed with the Holy Spirit. Just as God has united everything in Jesus the Christ God has united everything in us. We are called to carry God into the dirty places, into the scary places.

What do you fear *today*? Is it bankruptcy, public humiliation, running into your ex, the Giants losing, talking to people who struggle with English, owning up to something you've done wrong, your kid's getting into trouble, your parents meddling with your lives? We need shelter from the things that trouble us. We need some sense of order in chaos or sanity is just a dream. In Baptism God has forever torn a hole in our shelter. God has forever burst our bubble. We are called

into the world. We are plunged into the things we fear in order to bring God's gifts to those places.

We are plunged into poverty to feed and clothe those who have nothing. We are plunged into the public arena as people who bear witness to God's love. We are plunged into encounters with those who have hurt us, or whom we have hurt, for the sake of reconciliation and forgiveness. We are plunged into situations where we don't always win. We are plunged into difficult places so that we may show patience, kindness, and understanding. We are plunged into confession so that we might know forgiveness. We are plunged into letting go of those around us so that we can have faith that they will thrive and that God will be with them. We are plunged into remaining connected to those around us so that God's love can grow in the human family.

Friends of Christ the waters of baptism might look scary but they are the place where God's work is done. If we don't plunge in we are like fish out of water. The waters of baptism are our home. They're what we breathe. They're where we thrive. They're where we share our new life with Christ. In these waters God is at work in us, on the loose to save this broken world. The holes have been torn. There is no upstairs or downstairs. We're down and dirty, we're among the wolves, because God is here, and God is with us here. God is on the loose and offering new life. Take the plunge. Amen