

Sermon – Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Isaiah 43:1-7
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Grace Lutheran Church
Baptism of Our Lord – Year C
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“Redemption Song”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Eleven years ago today, young Torsten Thomas Lyle – named for the Norse thunder god and the honest, doubting disciple – was brought to the font at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Hanover, MN. He was, of course, adorable, dressed in the baptismal gown worn by generations of my wife’s family. He was baptized by his grandfather, surrounded by family and friends. After worship we posed for pictures and celebrated with a meal. It was an altogether lovely day. But it was more than that. For in the water and the Word was the winnowing fork of the Messiah, separating wheat from chaff. In the water and the Word was the Holy Spirit and a refiner’s fire. In the water and the Word, Torsten Thomas died to this life and was born anew as a beloved child of God.
2. In a very real way, Torsten’s story begins not on that cold January day in Minnesota. Neither does it begin on the warm South Carolina day of his birth. His story, and yours, begins in the waters of the Jordan when Jesus went down to be baptized by John, when the One who was to come finally, in the fullness of time, arrives on the scene. John has been baptizing with water for repentance, but he knows that he is just the opening act in the unfolding drama of salvation. Once Jesus shows up, John fades into the baptismal background. In the wake of his baptism, the heavens open up, the Spirit descends as a dove, and the heavenly voice proclaims to Jesus, for all to hear

- it seems, that he is the Son, the Beloved. Here, at the start of his ministry, without having yet done a thing, Jesus is proclaimed to be the One with whom God is well pleased.
3. One wonders, perhaps, what this means for Jesus in this moment. Did he need to hear these words? Was this news to him? In his rather odd “autobiography” of Jesus, *The Gospel According to the Son*, Norman Mailer depicts Jesus as suffering from repressed memory syndrome. In Mailer’s telling, Jesus, at his baptism, “felt as if much had come back to me from all that had been lost. I was once again with myself – a poor man, but good. And then I felt more. I had a vision of glory. The heavens opened for an instant and it was as if I saw a million, nay, a million million of souls.” Jesus, no doubt, delights in the delight of his Father, revels in God’s good pleasure. But ultimately, I think, the point here is less about who Jesus is to himself and more about who Jesus is for you. Jesus is the Son of God, the Beloved One, the One in whom God takes pleasure. He is all these things in himself and within the triune relationships, but he is also all of these things for your sake. The Son, that you could become a child of God. The Beloved, that you would know God’s love. The One in whom God delights, that in Christ and baptized into his death and resurrection, God would delight in you anew.
 4. The baptism by which this happens for us is a winnowing, a burning. It is a death and resurrection. The fire imagery is perhaps hard for us to hear this week. We have watched with horror and sadness as fires rage in California. At least sixteen people have died so far in this tragedy, and thousands of homes have been consumed in the flames. The fires have been revelatory, reminding us – again – of the increasing dangers wrought by climate change. Disparities have been highlighted, too. The *Los Angeles Times* ran a story this week about those who couldn’t leave, folks like landscapers and delivery drivers who kept working even in neighborhoods under imminent threat, while homeowners evacuated. As one UPS driver put it, “We gotta pay bills.

It's not like they're gonna pay us to stop working and leave." By no means does this mean we shouldn't have a deep well of empathy for those who have lost so much, but we can also have empathy for those who had less to begin with. May the end of these fires come soon, and may God protect all those in harm's way. Once this disaster has ended and the time comes to rebuild, there is an invitation and an opportunity not to simply rebuild the old, but to rebuild something new.

5. While we pray for the California fires to cease, we give thanks for the very different work of the Spirit's fire in our world. Each of us lives with chaff in need of winnowing, dross in need of refining. God has not come to prop up the status quo, to patch up the old. God has come to make all things new. This work begins with Jesus, the Son sent to fulfill the promise made through Isaiah to the people in exile. Jesus is the One given in return for you, the One in whose death you are given life. By him are you redeemed. For you does he go under not simply the waters of the Jordan but the very floodwaters of death, and in his dying and rising is the promise fulfilled. In Jesus, Isaiah's words become God's words of good pleasure in your ears, words that we speak at prayer time to Torsten and his siblings all these years later: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." In Jesus, God's good pleasure comes upon you. Yes, waters rage and fire burns. But God is with you. There is nowhere you can go – north, south, east, or west – where God won't come to you, for God has triumphed over death itself. Dead in sin no more, you are alive forever in Christ.
6. Where were you baptized? Who brought you to the font? Whatever your answers to these questions, we come once more today to praise the One in whom we are baptized, the Beloved Son in whom God delights. Your story is not your own; it begins with Christ and knows now no ending, for all the beloved, each of you, is alive forever with God. Do not fear. God is with you.

God has called you by name. You, for the sake of Jesus Christ, belong to God.
Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your
minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.