

The Baptism of Our Lord

January 10, 2010

Isaiah 43:1-7 ðGod is Staking a Claim: ðYou are Mine!ð

What better time than the beginning of a new calendar year to clarify what is our real identity in life? Our identity is not found in the ðnew með because of my new exercise program or the weight I lost as a result of my New Yearð resolutions. Our identity is not wrapped up with holiday happenings, as great as they were. Our identity is not connected to what gifts we gave or received at Christmas. And as wonderful as they may be, our identity is not exclusively found in our connections with family and friends we visited during the holidays. Rather, our identity is with God, who came to identify himself with us. In the Baptism of our Lord, Jesus identifies himself with us because his baptism was to fulfill all righteousness on his way to the cross. Christ was not baptized for his benefit, since he is without sin. Instead, he was baptized for our benefit as he connects himself to us. God has staked a claim on us. God says, You are mine!ð

First, God stakes his claim on people because he is the creator. Before anything existed, there was nothing except God. When God spoke the word, the Creation occurred, and so God has divine right for the origin of all things.

Our society wants to explain the origin of this world in ways that removes God from the equation. Various theories of our worldð origins have arisen over the years. I remember studying several of them when I was in high school years ago. We talked about the possibility of the world coming about with the ðBig Bang Theory.ð We looked at different versions of evolution that included billions of years of the universeð development and the transition of life from cells in the water, through animal, into cave man, into humans as they exist today. And even years beyond high school, I have heard variations on this theme discussed. What these theories generally all have in common is the removal or disregard of God as creator. If God can be removed from the equation, then there is no need for conscience, no moral truth to uphold, and no one to hold us accountable. It explains why what the Bible states are sins are no longer considered such by our society. Sins become acceptable behavior by society and some churches. Anything goes as long as you donð hurt yourself or others. There is no moral truth to hold us accountable.

Some people try to reconcile theories of evolution with the Biblical position on creation by God. I can see two reasons that people may want to do this. 1) The 24 hour day seems tremendously short to us to do Godð creative work, and 2) Reconciling the two positions can encourage people who hold an evolutionary view to embrace the God of the Bible. This is my position. I believe our God is big enough to create as the Bible states it. I can accept, by faith, that God created the universe, the earth, the animals, and people within six 24 hour days. I believe that sometimes we can make God too small in our minds. After all, how is it possible that the eternal God can enter fully into the humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ and become conceived in the womb of his mother, Mary? Or how can the infinite God enter into the finite bread and wine that we eat and drink at communion, just as we confess that Jesus comes to us in, with, and under the bread and the wine of communion. Otherwise, we can make God too small in our minds. God is the creator, and he stakes his claim on you and me. You are his.

God also has staked his claim on a particular nation, Israel. God is the creator, but Godð plan of salvation required him to choose one nation out of all the nations of the earth from whom the Messiah would come. God chose Abraham out of all the people in the world to be the father of a great nation. There was nothing extraordinary about Abraham, except that Abraham believed the promises that God made to him. So in Godð time, God chose one man and his descendants to be his special people. Abraham had a son Isaac who then had a son Jacob, to whom God gave the name Israel. Israel became the father of 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel. When God chose Israel, they became his special people with the promise of divine faithfulness and the expectation of their obedience to the laws and ceremonial regulations. They became Godð special people.

There is a third divine right that God holds today. He holds the right to a community of faith, that is, the Christian Church. God established a nation in the Old Testament with Israel, but God brought about the New Israel through the Lord Jesus Christ. You have become Godð special people through Godð plan to take a people for himself out of the world through the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Jesus came as the fulfillment of Godð plan, and the Christian Church is the greater fulfillment of Godð plan to take a nation from the descendants of Abraham. Out of all the people in the world, God calls you by his name and embraces you as his own. You are his.

Just as the New Testament Christian Church is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Israel, so there are two major events in both testaments where God stakes his claim on people as Redeemer. When Israel was enslaved in Egypt around 1500 BC, God worked his plan to deliver the people. He sent Moses to serve as prophet who taught the people and he also prepared Pharaoh for their departure from Egypt and slavery. When Pharaoh finally consented and let Godð people go, God parted the waters of the sea so that the people of Israel could walk out of Egypt to freedom. Later under the leadership of Joshua, God divided the waters of the Jordan River, and the people of Israel would cross over and conquer the Promised Land. When God gave the 10 Commandments to Israel shortly afterward, God reminded Israel who he was. He said, ðI am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Therefore, you will have no other gods before you.ð So God stake his claim on Israel when he became their Redeemer.

In a greater manner, Jesus Christ became our Redeemer who brought us out from slavery to our own sin and death. In about 30 AD, when our sins separated us from God, Jesus Christ took the world's sins upon himself at the cross. Three years before he did this, John baptized him in the Jordan River to fulfill all righteousness for us, the same waters that were once parted so that the people of Israel could cross over and settle in the Promised Land. Jesus placed himself in the same waters of baptism where the people he loved were preparing their own hearts to receive him. There at his baptism he heard his heavenly Father's affirming words, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." And this loving Son of God submitted himself to the cross and the wrath of God. There his loving Father turned his back on him because of our own sin. There he submitted to death on the cross. After his death, and before he was taken down from the cross, a soldier pierced Jesus's side, and from it flowed a mixture of blood and water that had separated after death. Three days later Jesus rose from the dead. Through his death and resurrection, and by his own precious blood which he shed at the cross, God has redeemed the world from sin, death and the devil. God stakes his claim on humanity through the Redeemer, Jesus.

Now in 2010, God shows himself as the deliverer for all time, and he stakes his claim on you! We have passed through the waters of baptism, and God has promised to be with us. St. Paul writes in the epistle reading today: "We were therefore buried with [Jesus Christ] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Through baptism and faith in our Redeemer's life, death and resurrection, we have become God's special people. And even when we pass through the fires of health crisis, emotional challenges, financial stresses, addictive behaviors, or whatever else, these things cannot change the fact that God has staked his claim on you. He passes through these things with you. God has your back. You are his!

There is one thing yet to say. God sets his claim on people as a harvester or ingatherer. Look around you today. All the people that are here today are here because God has gathered them in faith of Jesus Christ and in particular at St. Paul's Lutheran Church of Glen Burnie, Maryland. It is not an accident that you are here today. It is not even because you entirely made the decision to be here. This is what God does. God gathers the church. We read in Martin Luther's Explanation of the 3rd Article that "the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth." God has gathered you together to be the church at St. Paul's. God stakes his claim on you, and with that claim comes certain responsibility.

God continues to gather his people from the four corners of the earth. We are witnesses that tell other people the story of Jesus's life, death and resurrection so that they are gathered into the Christian faith. All people belong to God as Creator, but all people need to know Jesus as Redeemer to receive his gifts of forgiveness, salvation and eternal life. Our witness fulfills the Isaiah text which reads, "I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, 'Give them up,' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'" God wants to give people a new name - his name. When we gather other people into the Christian Church, they receive a new identity that is tied to our Lord Jesus Christ. They become the forgiven, redeemed, and reborn people of God. They are his.

But there is yet one more thing to remember. God has gathered you to his people. Never forget your special status before God. Isaiah writes about God, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you....Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine." God has a personal stake in you. He sent Jesus to die on the cross for you. He raised Jesus from the dead for you so that you can live. He opened heaven for you so that you can come in. He went north, south, east, and west until he found you, and now that he has found you he will not let you go. You are his!

Our true identity is not based on who I am or what I have done. Our identity is always based on who Jesus is and what he has done for me. He came to claim us as his own. He has placed his name on us. We are his.

soli deo gloria