

Sermon on the Baptism of Our Lord C: Luke 3:15-22 and Isaiah 43:1-7  
Custer Lutheran Fellowship, 1-7-2007, Pastor David Van Kley

### The Lyrics God Never Forgets

I read an article in Newsweek the other day about a group of high school cheerleaders who've terrorized their school, bullying peers and teachers alike. As I read the story, I recognized these voices as the same ones I heard as a child. "You're stupid. You're ugly. You're fat." And worse.

Not that I was innocent. I also used words as weapons on the playgrounds and in the classrooms of my childhood.

The trouble with hearing these voices is that we often believe them. They come to define who we think we are. Long after the voices themselves fall silent, we carry them around with us. And it doesn't take much for them to ring out in our ears once again. You're stupid. You're ugly. You're fat. And worse.

These voices often find *subtle* means of expression. Instead of just saying, "you're fat," they appear as magazine advertisements for *Slim Fast*, showing us how so and so lost 85 pounds in two months. Instead of just saying, "you're ugly," they become incarnate as middle aged men on TV telling how a certain product grew a new crop of hair on their balding heads, reviving a capacity for romance. We may know in our minds that these voices do not speak the truth, yet believe them in our hearts.

Sometimes, the person behind the voice doesn't *mean* to be bully. A young woman at Common Cents sold me a fishing license several months after I'd suffered that crippling injury while falling out of a tree. She took one look at me, with my white hair and cane, and asked if I wanted the senior citizen discount, which is available only to people over 65. I was 49 at the time. Her voice was saying, you look *old*. You *are* old. Therefore, I *felt* old.

This whole matter of personal security is difficult, isn't it? It's not easy to be at peace with who you are. It's not easy to be comfortable in your own skin.

Sometimes, we seek to prove ourselves by what we *do*. To *make* something of ourselves through the jobs we perform, the families we raise, the crafts we make.

Have you ever noticed that when you meet someone, it's almost impossible to settle for "Hi, I'm Sharon" or "I'm Bob." In the next breath, we ask, "what do you do for a living?" We introduce a friend by saying, "This is Sharon; she teaches fourth grade." "This is Bob; he's a retired banker from Denver." Jessie plays guard on the basketball team. Fred's a "horse person." They own a ranch east of Hermosa.

"Good morning, I'm Dave; I'm a *preacher*. A *Lutheran* preacher." Have been for 25 years. That's who I am. Which isn't bad, sometimes, because the pastoral office

commands considerable respect. It isn't bad when people say nice things about my preaching, which happens a lot.

But when I'm trying to preach and people are dozing off or reading their bulletins, well, then it doesn't feel so good to be a preacher. When I'm trying to write a sermon and nothing will come, which also happens a lot, I think, "I can't do this anymore." And if I can't do *this*, what can I do? What worth do I have? Not much.

I don't say this to garner your sympathy. I say it because these feelings are pretty much universal. Come home after a hard day at school and you wonder if you missed your calling. Get a bad review from your boss and you feel worthless. Get a D on a paper and you wonder if you're cut out for this. Your kids get in trouble and you think you're a total failure as a parent.

We define ourselves by what we do. And when what we do doesn't seem very good, it is natural to try harder to do more. So we keep raising our own expectations, as if we were raising the bar at a track meet, until its thirty feet high and not a pole vaulter in the world can clear it. That's when despair sets in. Meanwhile, we are totally, completely wrapped in ourselves, unable to be the self-giving people we were created to be. This is what the Bible means by the word *sin*.

True, there *are* some voices which express unconditional love. Our parents, hopefully. Grandpa or Grandma, an aunt or uncle. Our partner. Good friends. They honor us by using our given names. Or they use tender metaphors, like "Sweetheart." "Punkin." "Dear." "Honey." Instead of saying, "you should never have been born," they say, "I'm glad you're alive."

We are blessed if we hear such voices, yet it is not as easy to hear them as it is to hear the others. It may take a hundred "I love you's" to cancel out even one "you're stupid." I don't know why that is.

This I *do* know. There is another voice, the voice of *God*, with the power to overcome these voices and to define us. In today's first lesson, this voice proclaims to the whole battered people of Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. Because you are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you."

When "with all the people," Jesus descended into the waters of the Jordan, he heard this same voice. "You are my *Son*, the *Beloved*; with you, I am well pleased."

This was the voice which enabled Jesus to look past the empty compliments and false accusations of people around him. This was the voice which kept him true to his mission, even when he was bullied, viciously, on the cross.

This is the voice of *Baptism*. The voice which binds us to Christ. *We* are the beloved, through Christ our Savior. Before we became lawyers or camp directors, teachers or students, successes or failures, we were *beloved* of God. This is our *name*. This is the name which frees us from ourselves for the sake of the world.

Every morning when we awaken, we are invited to hear this voice and remember that we are beloved. Every time, we pass by that font, we are invited to plunge our hands into its waters and renew the mark of the cross on the brows. Every time, we confess our sins, we are invited to remember that voice which proclaims forgiveness. Every time, we take the broken bread in our hands, we—the broken—are invited to remember the One who was broken to make us whole.

You are beloved. No matter what other voices say about you, even the ones inside yourself. You are a child of God. You are precious. You are called to serve. You *are*.

I've visited at the nursing home here in Custer for seven and a half years now and there is one woman with late stage dementia who's neither comprehended my words nor spoken a single word to me. I am troubled by her condition and feel so bad for her family. At her bedside, I pray with a lump in my throat and fierceness in my voice, "Remember her baptism, O God. She is your beloved. She is your child. She is precious to you. Even if she does not know her name and few people remember her, you do." And God does.

With some old songs, only the chorus sticks with us. "Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way, oh what fun it is to ride in a one horse open sleigh." The verses are about bells and bob-tails and who knows what else: we can't remember exactly. But as long as we remember anything, we will never forget that chorus. It's been written on our hearts and minds with a *permanent* marker.

The songs of our lives have many verses. Some are wonderful; others not so much. Some moments we recall vividly; others slip away like water through a sieve. We will be blessed if we recall the baptismal chorus: I am beloved. Have been for X number of years. That's who I am. That's what counts."

Even if *we* forget, that's the *God* keeps coming back to, the part inscribed indelibly on *God's* heart and mind. "They are my beloved. Have been for X number of years. That's who they are. That's what counts."

Amen.