**Sermon Baptism of our Lord C**

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**Text:** *“Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Isaiah 43:1)*

My fellow redeemed in Christ: what is the Gospel? The word “gospel” means “good news” – literally, “good spell”, as in a word that carries power. We do not need to be reminded whose words have that kind of power: the only true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here today, we have one of the clearest words of Gospel in the whole Old Testament. “But now,” the prophet Isaiah writes, “thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Is 43:1) The power to create and recreate belongs to God alone. A few verses later in this chapter of Isaiah, we – the redeemed community – are called as the Lord’s “witnesses”, “and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he … I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior.” (vv. 10-11) The power to save comes through these spoken words.

Not only the power to create, but also preserve, belongs to our Lord. He promises to bring believers through every trial and circumstance with these familiar words: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flam shall not consume you.” (v. 2) We ought to understand that, when the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel, enlightening us with His gifts and keeping us in the one true, holy faith – our challenges are just beginning. But the same God who carried us through to this day is both able and willing to be with us. This, despite the raging of our sinful nature: the old Adam with its sinful desires. This is to say nothing of the Devil and the world.

But what the Adversary and the current spirit governing our world (“Dame Reason,” as Bl. Dr. Martin Luther called it) would have us believe is that God’s Word is of little or no value. We are constantly barraged by messages in popular media to the effect that “You have to make it real, make it your own.” We are not our own. In the Christian Church, this issue comes especially to the fore when we turn to the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. We can attest – not all babies and young children who come to the font show exuberance over the affair. Some are indeed brought screaming toward this grace-enriched water and renewal in the Holy Spirit. Several traditions deny the power of Baptism on these grounds. They assert, as in Luther’s day, that salvation is a choice. But the fact of the matter is that salvation is no more a matter of choice than the miracle of our creation. No one, least of all one redeemed by Christ, is a self-made person.

Under this light, we move to the next verse: “For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom,” etc., etc. (v. 3) The ancient Israelites’ exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea prefigured the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. St. Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians chapter ten: “and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:3). Yet we have another confirmation that baptism does come by Gods’ command, combined with His Word. Luther, in the Large Catechism, calls to mind our Gospel lesson: “Do you think it was a jest that the heavens opened when Christ allowed himself to be baptized, that the Holy Spirit descended visibly, and that the divine glory and majesty were manifested everywhere?” Therefore “you should honor and exalt Baptism on account of the Word, since God himself has honored it by words and deeds and has confirmed it by wonders from heaven.” (LC IV 21)

Luther continues: “To put it most simply, the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save. No one is baptized in order to become a prince, but as the words say, ‘be saved.’ To be saved, we know, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil and to enter into the kingdom of Christ and live with him forever.” (24-25) So it is we are called “Christians” after Christ, who Himself set apart this Sacrament by his baptism in the Jordan River. The ancient Israelites crossed the Jordan as they entered into the Promised Land; so does Jesus Christ, who is himself the Lord’s “servant” (Is 43:10), Israel reduced to one man. Only in Christ are we saved. It is not our decision, work, or worthiness that makes the Gospel “real” – the power and the gifts are real. It is just as real as Christ Himself, whenever and wherever one receives Him.

Human nature conspires to introduce human works into the salvation scheme. But in fact, those of us baptized as infants most closely resemble the case of Israel. As the Lord says to them, “I declared and saved and proclaimed when there was no strange god among you” (v. 12) – that is, when we had no thought of self-reliance, putting ourselves and our designs before the plan of God enacted in the miracle of baptism. Yet those baptized in young adulthood, or later, are also in mind: “you are my witnesses,” the Lord calls them in that same verse from Isaiah. It is a special gift to recall one’s Baptism – but of most importance is to “remember” our Baptism. This happens as we daily “put on Christ” (Gal 3:27), calling upon the Triune God in prayer and repenting of our sinful ways. We can call upon him and act Christ-like solely through the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ by which we have been called “Christians.” So we confess that Christ “my Lord has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me… that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting innocence, righteousness, and blessedness,” etc., etc.