

Problem: What does baptism do to us?

-*The Crown* on Netflix, scene of the coronation. For most of us, seeing a coronation is the most dazzling thing we could witness: trumpets, choirs, parades, gilded robes and golden crowns. This TV show does an interesting job of showing Elizabeth's struggle to keep herself "above the people." She is reminded by many characters: "you represent the crown and are not a normal person." The show follows her devotion and pain as she makes decisions which are meant to keep "the crown" and her "royal status and modeling" intact, but divide many in government, friendships, and even family.

-Our country in many ways is about to have its own "coronation" of sorts in a few weeks, when a new president will take office. Even though it doesn't have the same type of symbolism as a royal coronation, a presidential inauguration is still designed to be "lofty", "mighty", even in some ways "ordained." Why else would the future president take their oath and give a lofty speech high above the people at the capitol, parade through thousands of citizens, or dance with their spouse at more than 10 "gilded" Inaugural Balls?

-As we are in a time when our nation and future president will, indeed, try to show high and mighty power, I think it's important on this Sunday to remember another inauguration of sorts. Baptism is in many ways an inauguration and throughout history the church has tried to play it up as a "high and mighty" event. I'm sure many of us in this room at one point in our lives remember a pastor, Sunday School teacher, or even a respected role model of faith say in some way "you need to be baptized in order to get to heaven." This common interpretation of this sacrament, I think, harks back to a similar sense conveyed by a coronation or inauguration: you need to be "above the rest" in order to be blessed and allowed to be with God.

Solution: Baptism is a way that Christians remember "Immanu-el" (God with us) on the ground and are inaugurated into being a blessing for others.

-However, it's interesting to take a closer look at this "inauguration of Christ."

-In contrast to a US presidential election at the national capital, Jesus' inauguration to his earthly ministry happened in an out-of-the-way place that really no one beyond this tiny nation of Israel had ever heard of. It was in many ways "the middle of nowhere": a "wilderness." Jesus was not on a high platform, but went down into the water, letting himself be washed by the river. People were gathered at that place as well, though the numbers were certainly less than a hundred. John's message of baptism was not about political posturing, but about repentance and aligning with God's purposes of justice, righteousness, ethical integrity, and courage in the face of evil. For Jesus to submit to this baptism meant that he was challenging the worldly trappings of power and dominance, not embracing them.

-So, in almost every sense, despite the church throughout history seeking to keep baptism as a “high and mighty inaugural” sacrament (ironically mostly for its own preservation of power), the story of Jesus being baptized points at the opposite.

-For this last Sunday of Christmas, I think it’s important to see baptism as remembering God’s radical action of “Imanu-el” (God with us). Through Christ, God isn’t up on the capital platform wearing a golden crown or dancing in some hoity-toity balls. God is right here, down on the ground with us! Christ is inaugurated to be with us: lowly, sometimes boring, and yes sinful people that make mistakes. The message of baptism that I hope we can celebrate today is not God being “high and mighty”, but God being lowly and on-the-ground.

-The best part about it is that we too are inaugurated with the same thing that Christ was inaugurated by: not some holy, precious oil, but “lowly precious” water.

-Rev. Dr. Leah D. Schade, pastor at United in Christ Lutheran Church in Lewisburg, PA and who keeps a fascinating blog on preaching and creation care writes this: “It’s worth noting that for Isaiah (the OT reading for today) the call to be God’s servant wasn’t necessarily for one person – it was for the whole nation of Israel. God empowers people to do the work of building the peaceable kingdom; it’s a divine transference of power. This is a commissioning. God is telling the people: I have given you as a covenant – you are a sign of the covenant. You are blessed in order to be a blessing. As Christians, can we as a baptized community of faith be a people who do this?”

-In other words, are we *saved by* this sacrament of baptism or do our baptisms *save us for* something? I think, taking this story of baptism seriously, means us spending much less time trying to figure out how we are saved by baptism and as Pastor Schade suggests, spending much more time trying to figure out what baptism saves us for.

Implication: Baptism is meant for us to share, not stow away.

- Can we be blessed by our baptism so that we can be a blessing to others? And can we be a blessing for the very water with which we were baptized?”

-Article in Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN) that discussed in some areas of the state, the drinking water is getting salty because of the chemicals that they put on the roads. It is community organizations within these areas (that include churches) who are saying: we can’t be putting all of this stuff on our roads. We have to have clean drinking water.

-Water protectors at Standing Rock. While police were busy brutally spraying water cannons at protesters in their camps for displaying “riot-like behavior”, they were in reality breaking up interfaith prayer services by people of faith.

-Faith isn’t about the “golden ticket” and preserving status above the rest. Faith is active living and being engaged to help your neighbor and work to bring God’s kingdom. There is no more powerful symbol in being a blessing to others than our own baptisms.

-The last part of the baptismal liturgy, what I can almost guarantee was said at most of your own baptisms (if you are baptized) is this: “Stir up in _____ the gift of your Holy

Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. _____ you have been sealed with the cross of Christ forever.”

-All of us have been inaugurated to stir things up because the Holy Spirit, in our baptisms, has been stirred up in us. May God continue to “Immanu’el” (be with us) in this calling. Amen.