

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Martin Luther, in his *Lectures on Isaiah*, begins his discussion of Chapter 42 saying that he will address the chapter “briefly” because it will be addressed again in Matthew. Of course, as only Luther can, “briefly” became about seven paragraphs on the first verse alone. However, this is an important verse, and not just because we hear it from the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, but again in Matthew from the mouth of God Almighty. There is no doubt who Jesus of Nazareth is, and for whom he was speaking and by whom he was sent. Here, in a few words, we have the sound of the starter’s pistol for the ministry of Jesus.

Yes, the baptism of Jesus by John is the official starting point for the time of ministry of Jesus. From this point forward, all roads, and actions, lead to Calvary. But Jesus, having been born without sin and never having sinned, had no reason to be baptized in the first place. So, one can rightly ask, why was it necessary? It was necessary because it was a sign to the people of his solidarity with the human condition. After all, Jesus was truly man and truly God. By submitting to baptism himself, Jesus makes it clear that we, too, are to follow in his example. Of course, for us, the baptism is necessary, so that we might have our sins washed away and receive our inheritance as children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

In years past, sermons on this day have explored the importance of baptism as the initiatory rite of the Christian community. We have celebrated baptisms on this day, which bring the significance of the festival to life for us. As one who holds the Sacraments highly, you have heard me speak of the importance of baptism, as well as the Eucharist, just about every Sunday. I have not said all there is to say about the topic, and never will be able to do so. Today, I have a few words to share on the importance of baptism to our life, right here and right now.

Shortly after noon today, we will gather together as a congregation to discuss and vote upon a single question. “Shall we close Abiding Presence Lutheran Church?” This is not an easy question to consider. After all, we have been in ministry here for nearly fifty years. Here, or in our previous temporary home of Beltsville Adventist Church, children have been

baptized, couples married, anniversaries celebrated, and funerals conducted. From our number have come members of our synod and district councils, pastors and lay leaders of the church, and countless dollars of support to missions and ministries near and far. We have celebrated times of joy and shed tears of sorrow. From our own hands have come midwife kits, school supplies and backpacks, Christmas gifts and goodies for the poor, Thanksgiving dinners for the hungry. The ministry of the people of Abiding Presence has touched the lives of countless men, women, and children.

Just as the ministry of Jesus touched the lives to countless men, women, and children. From a humble start at the shore of the Jordan River, Jesus began to reach out and touch the lives of countless people. Jesus reached out to whoever was willing to listen to him—and to a lot of folks who weren't so willing, too. Jesus didn't ask what type of Jew they were, or what language they spoke, or where they called "home." No, Jesus simply reached out to the people around him, spoke the Word of God to them, and welcomed them as they welcomed him.

Most importantly, Jesus went to the people, and didn't ask the people to come to him. No where in my travels through Israel did the guide point out a single place that was "the" home synagogue of Jesus, the place where everyone would come to hear him preach and teach on the Sabbath. No, from the time of his baptism until his arrest, Jesus was on the move, taking God's Word to the people so that they might hear it where they were.

As Bishop Graham said to us last Sunday, Abiding Presence holds a unique place in the synod and Lutheranism in Maryland as well. Unlike our sister congregations, we didn't feel the effects of the changing community as soon as others. Unlike our sister congregations, we were placed here in Beltsville to serve a particular community that was not well-served by the other Lutheran churches around us. If I have learned anything of the social demographics of our area, we are boxed in by 295, I-95, and the Beltway. Folks from the west, especially west of the Montgomery-Prince George's County line, are extremely reluctant to cross that invisible border. People inside the Beltway are more focused on life in and around the University of Maryland. Those to the east of the agricultural research fields

continue to look to the east and south for their work. No other Lutheran church really looks into our geographical area as a place for service and proclamation.

When each of us was baptized, we were made children of God and brothers or sisters of Christ. We have been called by the power of the Holy Spirit to be a part of the Church of Jesus Christ, and as members of that church, we are called to make disciples of all nations, baptizing those who have not been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so that the Church of Jesus Christ might grow and be strengthened.

In the declaration of absolution, the presiding minister declares, “as a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by his authority, I declare the forgiveness of all your sins.” Seven years ago, at my ordination, I was ordained as a pastor of the Church of Jesus Christ, to serve Christ wherever the Spirit leads and calls me. I was not ordained to serve in this place alone, any more than I was baptized to be a member and serve Christ at St Paul Lutheran Church, Defiance, Ohio, or you were baptized to be a member of the church in which you were baptized, and that church alone.

Right now, at this point in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ, we have been called to serve God and serve God’s people as Abiding Presence Lutheran Church. Not one of us is indispensable to the ministry and mission to which we have been called. But, not one of us has the right to abrogate our responsibility to the call of the Holy Spirit to live out our baptismal promise and call as children of God and disciples of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Whether or not we chose to remain a congregation, there is still work to be done in the name of Jesus Christ in and among the people of Beltsville. The Church of Jesus Christ is made up of the baptized people of God, who are called, gathered, and sent into the world for the sake of the world, to bring the Good News of Christ to all people, without exception. That is a mission that cannot end with a vote, but only at that time when our Savior comes to us and says, “Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the house of your Lord!”