

Sunday, January 10, 2016 – Baptism of Our Lord  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

### **Inspiring Thought for the Day**

On Monday, I was dropping my daughter Ruth off for her dance class, and I noticed a paper taped to the door of the dance studio. It was the first class of the new session for the new year—or so I thought, I wasn't sure that there actually was class that day, so I peered closer at the paper on the door, thinking it might be about that. It wasn't, we could hear that the dance class was beginning and so Ruth went on in, but I lingered at the door—for I saw that the note said, "Inspiring Thought for the Day." I don't think they had these notes on the door in the fall, maybe it was a new practice for the new year, like a new year's resolution? I like inspiring thoughts. I read it: "The past exists only in your imagination. Recreate yourself, starting today."

Huh, I thought, of the inspiring thought. It sounds encouraging. It makes a powerfully positive assertion—but I'm not sure I believe it. "The past exists only in your imagination. Recreate yourself, starting today." It sounds appealing, but I'm not sure I believe it.

I thought about it some more, and I thought about practices and thoughts of Christian faith. In particular, I thought about the Christian practice that we focus on today, this Sunday that is known as Baptism of Our Lord. I thought about the paper on the dance studio door and what it says, and I thought about the sacrament of baptism and what it says, and how different they are. I don't mean to be beating up on the dance studio, it's a very nice place with very nice people. Who knows how much they even thought about the inspiring thought before they posted the paper. But I think that comparing what it says, with what Baptism says, can be inspiring—in the truest sense of the word.

First, the first part: "The past exists only in your imagination." I think I understand the idea behind, and the impetus for, such an assertion, that "the past exists only in your imagination." The idea behind this being—the fact behind this being—that we cannot do anything to the past. It's past. It's past, and now it lives in our minds, in our memory. The past may have a vibrant existence there, but however much it does, however much we think about the past, we will not be able to relive it, or change it. We cannot enter into the past, it exists in our minds.

However, this does not mean that the past exists only in our minds. The past is not just something in one individual's head. To say so strikes me as dangerously close to the counsel—to the very cold counsel, to the often tragic counsel—that is sometimes offered to victims of abuse. Perhaps they are victims of racism, or sexism, or other kinds of victims. Sometimes these and other victims are told that they are "only imagining it." But you know, well you know if you have been a victim, if in your past someone has hurt you: it didn't happen only in your imagination. And on the same token, if you have hurt someone, it didn't happen only in their imagination, either. The past is not just something we imagined, we have experienced it, individually, and collectively. The past is not something that is there just when we close our eyes. Nor is the past something we can close our eyes to, try to wish away. The past happened: to us, and by us.

The Christian sacrament of Baptism comprehends this: that we have a past, a past that includes pain. I'll say more about that later, but before that, I want to point out the largeness of the past that baptism comprehends. Baptism is aware of the past, and of the vastness of the past.

The sacrament of baptism recites it, recites God's relationship with the universe, God's relationship with God's people. Baptism calls us back to our origins, which begin in water. Think of the history of creation, the separation of firmament and sea, the evolution of life, being drawn out of the ocean. Think of the history of the people of Israel, drawn out of slavery in Egypt, pulled through the parting waters of the Red Sea. Think of your own history, think of how every human life originates in a watery womb and is born through the breaking of water.

In baptism, we remember and recite our scientific and—much more significantly—we recite our sacred history—a history that passes through water. And then, in baptism, we hear the name that God gives to it. In baptism we hear the name that God gives to his history with us. God says to the creation, "You are good." God says to Israel, "I have called you by name, you are mine." God says to you, as to Jesus, in baptism, "You are my Beloved, with you I am well pleased." These are powerful, positive proclamations, so powerful they can bring water to our eyes—tears. I feel them springing to my eyes, I see them shining in yours, when there is a baptism. We felt that, just after Christmas, at the baptism here, and will again later this winter. We see the child, and the adults awash in hope; we feel this overflowing love that God has for us; we hear that God calls us beloved and good. The sacrament of baptism can bring tears to our eyes, because we experience again God's positive pronouncement about us. Baptism calls us back to our origins, back to our original goodness—and to our original sin.

For, the sacrament of baptism also takes account of that part of our past that is not good, the part of our past that is pain—the pain we feel, the pain we inflict, the reality of sin and death. Baptism comprehends that, too. In the rite of baptism, before this gracious naming that comes with these splashes of water, before that holy, sacred moment, there are these questions, renunciations is the historical word for it. In the rite of baptism we ask: "Do you renounce the devil, and all the forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw you from God?" The rite of baptism includes these renunciations, even when the baptism is of a tiny little baby, because baptism acknowledges that there is evil in the world, and we are part of it. We were born into it, and we experience it, and perpetuate it—and we cannot make it go away by saying that it's all in our imagination. Well we know the ways we fall short of our obligations to others, and to ourselves, fall short of what God wants for us and for our world. Well we know those experiences, those situations, when we have done things that we regret. Well we know, also, that no amount of thinking the things that we regret can change them. We cannot undo our past. We cannot recreate it. We cannot recreate ourselves.

This, of course, was the other part of that paper that was posted to the dance studio door that is very different from Christian faith, the second part, which said, "Recreate yourself." It sounds encouraging, at first, like a positive new year's resolution. But ten days into the new year, we may all be already tired of resolutions, like: "Recreate yourself." Imperative that it is, I think it may be less inspiring, than exhausting—not to mention impossible. Not because recreation is impossible, but because—Christians faith proclaims—it's not something that begins with us. Baptism is not something that we do to ourselves; it is something God does to us, does for us, gives to us. In that powerful, positive proclamation at the font, we hear that the past that we have is neither imaginary, nor destiny. Our past is swallowed up in God's future, God's grace, God's inspiration. God inspires us. God gives us the Holy Spirit. On the day of our baptism, and today, starting today and every day, God is recreating us.