

Sunday, March 13, 2016  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Isaiah 43:16-21

## New

It's about grace and Isaiah today. In worship today we have a special focus on grace and Isaiah. Pastor, you may be thinking, you've got the wrong Stumme family. There's a baptism today, but the baptismal candidate is not in the Stumme family with the children named Grace and Isaiah, it's in the Stumme family with the children Emma and Amelia.

Amelia is the one getting baptized today, that is correct. It is also true that all too often I get names wrong. My children will confirm, with chagrin, that I sometimes call them each other's names. Or sometimes I call them the dog's name. Or I call the dog their name. The dog doesn't seem to mind as much. Then there was the time I was trying to remember the name of that woman who sings in the choir, she's a soprano, has dark hair and bright blue eyes. I asked our music director, "What's her name again?" He looked at me, and reminded me, deadpan, "Her name is Erin."

I get names wrong, but I don't have it wrong when I say that today is about grace and Isaiah—the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah chapter 43, "The Lord makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters." The grace of baptism: God's free gift of love and forgiveness, poured out upon us, like a stream of water from a gleaming jug, like ocean waves, rolling over one another. The prophet Isaiah could be talking about the grace of baptism, when he proclaims that God does a new thing, God makes a way, a path in the mighty waters. Isaiah and grace and a baptism today.

What is baptism? Amelia's big sister Emma, three year old Emma, explained it to her baby sister in this way: "They're going to pour water on your head and say some words." You have to admire the way Emma is already capably and authoritatively taking on the big sister role of interpreter, advisee. Was Amelia wondering about this—was baby Amelia pondering what baptism is? I'm inclined to think that Amelia had not been contemplating the method and meaning of the sacrament of baptism. Which is fine. When we baptize babies, we take this into account: that babies might not exactly perceive what is happening, even if their big sister has explained it to them. We know, too, that a baby cannot renounce the ways of sin and death, a baby cannot promise to be part of a Christian community—two key parts of what baptism includes. So when the baptismal candidate cannot say these things, the parents say these things on the child's behalf, promise to help the child as they grow, as they find their voice in a life of faith. The baptismal sponsors promise to help with this, too. I have no doubt that Emma will help with this, too. Others, too—all of us here. We all say we that we will help with this when we have a baptism here, especially when it is the baptism of a baby. It's what a Christian community should do, even though the baptism of a baby is not quite what you'll find in the Bible, or in the early history of the church, it was mostly adults, back then. Infant baptism is not the foundational method you'll find—but it does convey, in a profound way, what baptism means, at its foundation.

What is baptism? Baptism is the visible sign and personal reception of God's grace, God's love and forgiveness, poured out upon us. Infant baptism illustrates how free, how unearned that grace is. When it is a baby who is being baptized, we have a perfect picture of how grace comes to us—not because we know how to ask for it, not because we even really know what it is, and, above all, not because we deserve it. It wouldn't be grace, if it we did.

God simply gives it to us, love and forgiveness. With a wash of water, God's wipes away all that has been messed up in us, or by us, all the ways we make a mess of life, all the ways we sin.

Do babies sin? We wondered about this in a recent Confirmation class that focused on baptism. I was more inclined towards "yes, babies sin," than the 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> grade students were. Perhaps that is because I am a pastor—or maybe because I'm a mother. Amelia's pretty sweet, but I'll be she has her moments. I know she'll have more of them as she ages, she'll make a mess of things. She's probably already making a mess of things. I'm thinking of when she eats, think of babies' cheeks and pureed peas. As she starts feeding herself she will only get more messy. It gets like that, as you grow up, things get more messy. But think of the warm, wet rag that cleans up Amelia's face, when it's such a mess, and then there she is, fresh cheeked and smelling sweet. Think how baptism is like that, it's like a watery wiping clean. In baptism, all the mess we've known and done is wiped away, and we become new.

Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah, talks about that, about the new thing God does, through water. It's so new, we can hardly comprehend it. It's so profound, we can hardly perceive it. So often, we look in the mirror and we think, it's just the same old me. We look out the window and think, it's just the same old world. Not so, God says, through the prophet Isaiah, "Do not remember the former things... all the messes you made, all the things you did." Isaiah says, "Look at what God is doing, a new thing. Do you not perceive it?" God says, "I formed you for myself, I made you my child." Every morning when you wake up, when you look in the mirror and splash your face with water, remember your baptism, remember that you have been made new. When you look out the window, at the rain, remember, God's mercy is new, every morning. Because in baptism, God is doing a new thing, God is making you and all of creation a new thing. "Do you not perceive it?"

I think babies perceive it. Somehow, sometimes, they seem to know something at sacred moments, at Holy Communion, or at Holy Baptism, babies and young children will sometimes have this holy hush about them. They know that something important is happening. (They're usually not so quiet when I'm preaching...) Now maybe today Amelia will sleep through her baptism, or wail. But that's fine, too, because it doesn't matter what she does, baptism is what God does, gives us a new identity, calls us by name. God knows all our names, and gets them right—gets them really right. In baptism, God calls us by name, by first name and middle name, and then God adds another name, a last name that takes precedence even over family names. At the font, our last names are dropped, as we receive our most accurate, and gracious last name: child of God.