

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
The Baptism of Our Lord  
January 7, 2024  
Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft  
***Jesus brings the faraway nearby***

<sup>1</sup>Listen to me, you coastlands. Pay attention, you faraway peoples! The Lord called me from the womb. When I was inside my mother, he mentioned my name. <sup>2</sup>He made my mouth like a sharpened sword. He hid me in the shadow of his hand. He made me a polished arrow. He concealed me in his quiver. <sup>3</sup>He said to me, “You are my servant Israel, in whom I will display my glory.” <sup>4</sup>But I said to myself, “I have labored in vain. I spent my strength and came up empty, with nothing. Yet a just verdict for me rests with the Lord, and my reward is with my God.” <sup>5</sup>But now the Lord, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to turn Jacob back to him, so that Israel might be gathered to him, so that I will be honored in the eyes of the Lord, because my God has been my strength— <sup>6</sup>the Lord said: It is too small a thing that you should just be my servant to raise up only the tribes of Jacob and to restore the ones I have preserved in Israel, so I will appoint you to be a light for the nations, so that my salvation will be known to the end of the earth.

—Isaiah 49:1-6

Trains, planes, and automobiles. When you live a distance from relatives, how do you travel to them? Many people at our church have relatives who live far away. Many of you have family back in the Midwest or California. So, when you go to visit how do you travel; a train, a plane, or a car? We live in a world in which traveling long distances to visit other people has become very easy. People already had a compelling cause to travel which was love. Now, modern advances and technology make travel much more efficient.

In the first lesson, the speaker calls out to those who are far away from the Lord. He tells them what the Lord will do to bring them nearby with an easier path than modern travel. What we learn in this first lesson is that Jesus brings the faraway nearby. Jesus brings them nearby with his life through the means of grace.

Our lesson for today picks up in a section of Isaiah about the coming Savior. One of the views of the coming Savior in the book of Isaiah is the promise of the Servant. Essentially, the concept is that Israel had failed to fulfill its role as the servant of the Lord. Therefore, a second servant was coming to take their place. Today, we see a portion about this second servant and see that this is Jesus. Notice how the servant notes that he comes not only for Israel but for all who are far off. Jesus brings the faraway nearby.

The first way that we see Jesus does this is with his life. This lesson connects with the gospel which shares Jesus' baptism. Jesus was baptized as the marker of the beginning of his three-year earthly ministry. This is the time in which he would preach, perform miracles, and do many of the things that he did perfectly as the substitute for Israel.

Here, the servant says that the LORD called him from the womb. As we just celebrated Christmas, we see that this indeed is true about the life of Christ. Even from the womb of the Virgin Mary, he lived the life to save those who were far off. At that time, he was given a name that was given to his parents by an angel of the Lord, Jesus.

Next, the Servant indicates that he was the substitute for God's people Israel. You can see many ways through Jesus' life that he lived as their substitute. He went down to Egypt and came back. Following his baptism, he was tempted into the wilderness. Jesus is the servant who came to be the substitute for Israel.

God's glory was displayed in his life. When Jesus was baptized, people heard the Father call down from heaven. Jesus' many miracles demonstrate the glory of God. Jesus himself is the glory of God as is written in Hebrews 1:3, “The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of the divine nature.” Yes, God displayed his glory in this Servant, Jesus.

This servant song of Isaiah speaks about Jesus. Jesus came to bring those who were far off nearby. He did this through his life. He lived perfectly as the substitute for Israel and all people. Today, as we remember the baptism of Jesus, we see the beginning of his earthly ministry. We consider all that he did throughout his life to bring those who were far away nearby.

The obvious question is how would Jesus' life do such a thing? Well, those who are far away from the Lord are all people who are by nature sinful. Sin separates people from the God of the universe. Jesus is the Servant who came to be the substitute. He lived a perfect life as God demanded. Then, he gave up his life on the cross. Because Jesus is truly God and truly man, the giving up of his life was sufficient for the salvation of all people. Therefore, those who were far away were brought nearby by Jesus.

You wouldn't try to drive to California without a driver's license. You wouldn't try to fly to France without a passport. You need the right credentials. So, why do so many people want to come to God without the proper credentials of Jesus' life? Many people believe that they can get nearby God by living a decent life. Others believe that it can happen by getting better than they used to be. Some believe that they need to add to what Jesus has done in his life. Yet, that ruins your credentials. Just like a water-damaged passport can't work, neither can the Jesus plus method. We know

that those false credentials will not pass. Yet, do we ever try to get by with other false credentials? Perhaps, it is the false credential of heritage. The thought that since my family built this church it means that I should be allowed to be near God. Perhaps, it is the false credential of religiosity. The thought that since you help out at church a lot you should be let near God.

Brothers and sisters, our works, no matter how pious cannot bring us near God. Our works are nothing but sin apart from Christ. As is written elsewhere in Isaiah, "All our righteous acts are like a filthy cloth." (Isaiah 64:6) That filthy cloth of your supposed good works is not proper credentials to be near God.

The only way to be brought near God is the life of Jesus Christ. So, drop your false credentials and receive his true credentials. The true credentials of Jesus are these: Jesus lived perfectly under God's law for you. Jesus suffered the punishment of your sins in your place. This is what has brought you near God: the life of Jesus.

People of Emmanuel, God has brought you nearby. You who were once far off are his holy people. God is with you in this life. His Holy Spirit lives within you. Jesus comes to you every Sunday in Word and Sacrament. You have been brought nearby. Jesus brings the faraway nearby.

We understand that Jesus' life is the proper travel credential for you. The question then is how does what Jesus has merited through his life come to you? You don't pick up an ID at the MVD. You don't receive the passport book from the USPS. Instead, the results of what Christ has done in his life are delivered to you by different means. Jesus brings the faraway nearby through the means of grace.

Let's get a quick definition of the means of grace. The means of grace are the vehicles through which God gives forgiveness, life, and salvation to people, namely, the gospel in Word and sacrament. When we use the term the means of grace, we are talking about the Bible, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. These are the means through which God brings the faraway nearby.

When we consider the baptism of our Lord, we see the beginning of his earthly ministry. In verse 2, we see that Jesus was hidden for a time, but he was revealed to be who he was at his public anointing. Then, following this, during Jesus' earthly ministry, we see the power of his Word. Jesus spoke many wonderful things. Jesus spoke beautiful parables. Jesus taught as no one had taught before him. Jesus, who is the very Word of God, spoke the powerful Word of God. God's Word is like a sharpened sword is what the Servant says. The Law convicts people. The Gospel gives life.

Jesus also established two other forms through which life-giving forgiveness and grace were delivered. These are called the sacraments. According to Jesus' institution, God's Word along with an earthly element is a powerful tool. These are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his ministry. After his resurrection, Jesus commanded his disciples to go out and baptize others. Baptism marks new life for those people.

The servant said it was too small a thing to just save the people of Israel. Therefore, Jesus came to save people of all nations. Then, he sent his disciples out with the powerful means of grace to bring this forgiveness, life, and salvation to all. Consider the well-known passages; Matthew 28:19-20a, "Therefore go and gather disciples from all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to keep all the instructions I have given you." To accomplish the goal of making salvation known to the ends of the earth, Jesus sent his disciples out with the means of grace. Jesus brings the faraway nearby.

If you planned to travel for Christmas, did you choose to use a reliable airline? If you decided to drive, did you make sure the car was reliable? Of course, we want to make sure our modes of transportation are reliable.

Many people recognize that they are far away from God because of their sins. Maybe, they do not even know him by name, but they know that something through their natural knowledge of God and the law written on their hearts. Sadly, these people use unreliable means to attempt to get near God. From false religions to following emotions, these people fail to get nearby. The plane won't take off and the car won't start. These modes of coming to God won't work.

Supposed Christians will try to use faulty vehicles to be brought near God as well. Many American churches push what is called "the sinner's prayer." They believe that a person must decide to follow God to be saved. That vehicle won't work. People who are dead by nature cannot come to God or choose him.

We don't decide; instead, God does the work by His Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to us through the means of grace. When the word is preached, the Holy Spirit works. When the sacraments are distributed, the Holy Spirit works. You cannot come near God on your own, but God sent means through which his Spirit comes to you. Through these means the spirit works conversion and regeneration. He brings people from death to life. Then, he strengthens them continually through them.

My baptism marked the beginning of my nearness to God. When I was baptized on December 25, 1994, the Holy Spirit created faith in my heart to receive the forgiveness that comes from Jesus' life. When I grew up the Holy Spirit came to me time and time again working the Word about Jesus' life. When I was confirmed in 2009, I received the Lord's Supper for the first time. I received the forgiveness of my sins which were merited by Jesus in his life. Time and time

again in my life, God's grace has been delivered to me through these means. Brothers and sisters, this is the same for you. You were baptized. The Word came to you. You receive the Lord's Supper. These are the means of grace. Through these means, the Holy Spirit delivers forgiveness, life, and salvation to you. Jesus accomplished this by his life, death, and resurrection. You have been brought near God. Jesus brings the faraway nearby through the means of grace.

When you live far away from your family, you will take a train, a plane, or a car to go see them motivated by your love. You want to be nearby. Our sins brought us far away from God. Jesus brings the faraway nearby. He worked this through his life. His baptism marked the beginning of this ministry. He brings this to you through the means of grace. Your baptism marked the beginning of your life with him. Amen.