

LIVING OUR HISTORY

ACTS 10:34-48

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

JANUARY 9, 2005

SHEPHERD OF THE VALLEY LUTHERAN CHURCH, LUMSDEN SK

This Sunday marks the First Sunday after the Epiphany. The word Epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning “to appear” and so Epiphany, which the church celebrated on January 6, marks the appearing of the newborn Christ to the world. In particular, on Epiphany we celebrate the coming of the magi to see Jesus. It is our way of affirming that Jesus is not just a gift for the Jews—not just a gift for one people—but a gift for all peoples.

And so, at the start of this season of Epiphany we focus on the start of Jesus’ ministry—of his revealing his divine nature—of his appearing to the world. As the texts unfold for the next few weeks, we will see Jesus revealing himself by healing people, performing miracles and amazing the Pharisees and bystanders.

It’s also appropriate that this first Sunday after the Epiphany—after the appearing—would focus on the Baptism of Christ as the start of his early mission.

It’s also a good opportunity for us to look at Baptism—and our own baptisms—mean to us.

When students hear the word “History”, there is often a bad feeling in their stomachs. History is the one subject that almost nobody claims to enjoy. When we think of history, we think of useless dates, facts, and figures. We think of events like crossing the Rubicon, or signing the Magna Carta. We think of people like Alexander the

Great, or Napoleon. And we wonder what difference it makes whether these people existed or not.

We think of history as something in the past—of something distant and irrelevant to us today. Let’s face it, for most of us history is just not important.

As I get older, I have acquired a new appreciation for history. This past summer involved canoeing down the same river that Lewis and Clark first paddled up as they explored the new Louisiana Territory for a much younger United States of America. It was interesting passing by and camping out at the same campsites that Lewis and Clark wrote about 200 years before.

It is interesting visiting sites of historical significance such as Grey Owl’s cabin in Prince Albert National Park, or the oldest church west of Manitoba at Stanley Mission.

Travel back in history is a common theme in movies and television shows: Harry Potter being one of the most recent. The point of these movies is that the most seemingly inconsequential act can play a pivotal role in the history of the world. Gwynne Dwyer once commented that World War I was almost averted except that the trains carrying Russian soldiers, equipment and ammunition has already left for the front and couldn’t be recalled.

There is one piece of personal history that many people feel meaningless or trite. That piece of personal history is our Baptism.

Many people regard it simply as a neat little ceremony. The minister sprinkles some water on the child’s head, says some special words, camera flashes go off and the next day goes on as usual.

This is how many people treat baptism, but it isn’t what baptism is. It is not just a piece of one’s personal

history like that lock of hair from the first haircut taped into the scrapbook.

Our lesson from Acts this morning teaches two lessons. The first is that Christianity is not just a Jewish religion but is meant for the whole world.

The second lesson tells us of the important as Baptism. We often refer to Baptism as a christening. This dates back to the time when a child was given a Christian name at Baptism.

But the point of Baptism is not to give an individual an earthly name but a heavenly one. We are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

In Baptism we have a new identity. It's not just a historically trite ceremony; it's a life-transforming event. Baptism is proof that God is at work in our lives.

In our lesson, we find Cornelius and all who were there hearing the Word of God and the Holy Spirit falling upon all of them. Because they had become Christians their identity was changed—they were transformed into children of God. It was only appropriate that this new nature is demonstrated by Baptism for this was the day that they became children of God. The fact of their Baptism would remind them of this even for the rest of their lives.

We often don't make as big a deal of Baptism as we should. We are prepared to celebrate our natural birthday every year—but our baptismal birthday—the day when we became children of God's family usually goes unnoticed and almost certainly uncelebrated.

But baptism shouldn't be a one time thing. It shouldn't just be a trite historical ceremony. It's not just an ending; rather it's a beginning. It marks the beginning of a relationship between us and God and regardless of

whether we take it seriously or not, God takes it very seriously.

Baptism marks our roots. When we have doubts and anxieties in life—when we are unsure of our faith—we can look again and remember our Baptism and the fact that in that act, God has entered into our lives, made us his children, and brought us into his family. That relationship can never be undone.

Our baptism should be part of our history that lives us live out our present. By remembering our own Baptism, we are living out our history. Our lives have depth and roots and we have proof that there is something upon which we can depend during the uncertain times of life. That something is the love of God.