



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Baptism of Our Lord: January 13, 2019

Sermon Title: "The Most Important Day of My Life"

Gospel Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

What was the most important day of your life? It's a hard question, isn't it? For example, if you're 40 years old, you've experienced 14,610 days, taking leap years into account. When you add them up, that's a *lot* of days. It's difficult to pick just *one* day as the most important day of your life.

Of course not *every* day in a person's life is noteworthy and memorable. But within the course of *any* lifetime, surely there are *plenty* of days that might qualify as the "most important day of your life." For example, I could pick the day I first became interested in my wife Linda. It was in Clarion, where we were both college juniors. It was a cold January day. I was downtown at – you guessed it – a bookstore – and bumped into Linda and her roommate there on Main Street. It wasn't like we were complete strangers – we had met as freshman in college - but that hadn't produced any sparks. In fact, in all honesty it produced the complete opposite! But something changed that day outside the bookstore. We made plans for that evening, and over thirty years later, by some miracle of God, she's still putting up with me and still finding me at bookstores. Certainly *that* day was an important day in my life.

But maybe the days we adopted our two children qualify as the most important days of my life. After so many frustrating years of waiting to have children, how exciting it was when our adoption of our daughter was finally complete. It was equally exciting and life changing to adopt our son. I'll never forget how worn out, nervous, and tense we felt as we walked that last hundred yards or so across a land bridge from Mexico into El Paso, Texas. Linda held Emilio so tightly and protectively, and I had a backpack filled with legal documents in English and Spanish in case a border agent of either nation challenged our right to bring our son home. Relief flooded over us in waves as we finally stepped into the United States. It was such an important day in my life.

I suppose I could make a strong case for another day though – the day I showed up at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Augusta, Maine to meet with the pastor there, Pastor Jon Vogel. I was trying to make sense of God, my life, and what God wanted me to do *with* that life. In response to all those questions, God put just the right guy in my path at just the right time. Through his example, his counsel, and the relationship we formed, God brought clarity to my faith life and put me on a road that led me to a new way of life and a new career. *That* was certainly an important day.

I'll share one more potential candidate for most important day in my life. It was a warm August day in the summer of 2007, on the campus of Gettysburg Seminary, Room 310,

Valentine Hall, as a group of eager and slightly terrified seminarians began learning ancient Greek, including the 24 ways that exist in that language to say “the.” It was the beginning of a journey that would build us up, break us down, and build us up again to follow God’s call to be leaders within the church. It was the beginning of a surrender to Jesus Christ that we hoped would transform *our* hearts so that we might be of some use to God in helping the hearts of *others* to be transformed. And it was the beginning of friendships that I expect will endure a lifetime. That too was a vitally important day in my life.

But the longer I thought, the more I was forced to conclude that the most important day of my life was a day I cannot even recall. I don’t remember *anything* about it. Every detail I’ve learned about that day has come to me second hand. But that day – the most important day of my life – set the stage for every other day that came after it – both the important ones and the ordinary ones. That day was March 20, 1966, the day I was baptized at Tabor Lutheran Church in Kane, Pennsylvania. There a crusty but faithful old Swede-Lutheran, Pastor Mallard Nelson, sprinkled my *head* with ordinary water and saturated my *heart* with God’s promises.

But of all the days I could’ve selected as the most important day in my life, why *this one* – a day I can’t even remember? Well, let me begin to answer that by considering *another* baptismal day – that of Jesus, as we heard in today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus’s baptism was utterly unique because, unlike us, he was sinless and hence needed no forgiveness. Jesus’s baptism was not for *his* benefit, but for *ours*.

You see, by his baptism Jesus set the standard for us. Just as his earthly ministry began after his baptism, so does ours. And just as his *descent into* the baptismal waters and his *rising out of* those same waters foreshadowed his forthcoming death and resurrection and the corresponding victory over sin and death he would win for us and for all creation, *we too* are called into a death of the sin, self-righteousness, stubbornness, and pride that reside within *us*, so that *we* can rise as *new* people, *hopeful* people, clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

There was one additional aspect of Jesus’s baptism that deserves particular mention, because in *his* case it was probably the most important thing. At the completion of his baptism, as he prayed, the entire Holy Trinity appeared. The Holy Spirit was there, in a form like a dove. And God’s voice from heaven proclaimed, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus’s baptism was not about the forgiveness of *his sins*; it was about proclaiming *his identity*. That’s why the Baptism of our Lord is critically important: it reminds us that Jesus is more than just an ancient spiritual leader or sage teacher. He is the *Son of God*, our *Lord and Savior*, *fully human* and *fully divine*, *worthy* of our *worship*.

Unlike Jesus, my baptism *did* involve God’s forgiveness of my sins. And it’s no exaggeration to say that I’ve needed to renew that forgiveness every day of my life. In my baptism, I followed after Jesus into the waters where *he* descended so that, as Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, “the old creature [in me] with all sins and evil desires” could be “drowned and die” – not solely on that day in March – but *every* day through daily repentance, so that daily I might have the opportunity, solely by God’s grace, to “rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”¹ What a remarkable promise. It’s a *huge* reason why I consider my baptism the most important day of my life. It laid the ground work for the

conditions necessary for me to achieve wholeness in *this life*, and joy *eternally*. God offers that same gift to *all of us* in baptism.

But *like* Jesus's baptism, *my* baptism also carried with it the priceless gift of *identity*. In my case, baptized or not, I'm no divine savior. Quite the opposite. I am a flawed person, a sinner. Of that there is no doubt. But thanks be to God, on account of my baptism, I know I am also a beloved child of God. No matter what labels the world may apply to me, that one – *beloved child of God* – can never be superseded or deleted. Friends, I'm not kidding when I tell you that I think about my baptism *every single day*, because *every single day* I need the assurance that Jesus Christ has claimed me forever and will never let me go. And *every single day* I depend on his promise that he loves me even when I am at my most unlovable. Jesus offers that *assurance* and that *promise* to you as well.

In the course of my life, just like you, I've had my share of good days and bad days. But there's no doubt in my mind that my baptism day is the most important day of my life. I hope something you've heard or experienced today will also help you connect with *your* baptism, because *you too* are eternally beloved. *You too* are a child of God. And armed with that knowledge *you too* can live in hope. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Citations

¹ *Small Catechism*, Article Fourth