

Saved by Water to be Servants in the World

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
Denver, Colorado
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Following the sermon today at the 10:30 service, we will be privileged to celebrate the baptism of CharlieAnn Jane Barrett. Today's second reading from 1st Peter makes reference to baptism, so this is a timely celebration of the sacrament for Jeremy and Jennifer's darling little girl.

Did you notice that the reading from 1st Peter makes reference to Noah and the ark? Now that's a very well known biblical story – at least the animals in the ark part is very well known. I would like to remind you of some of the context of the story of Noah so that we might hear the 1st Peter reference with a broader understanding than just animals marching two by two into Noah's big boat.

In the 6th chapter of Genesis, we read:

God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth."

Genesis 6:13.

Then follows the instructions for building the ark which includes this statement from the Lord God:

I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.

Genesis 6:17-18

Then the story continues about the rain falling for forty days and nights, the ark floating, and the tragic result:

All flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings... He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground... Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark.

Genesis 7:21-23

Most of the descriptions of this text from Genesis focus on the use of the word "destroy" to capture the action. God "destroyed" the earth.

It is, then, intriguing that Peter uses the story of Noah in quite a different way. The writer of 1st Peter says that by means of the flood, God saved Noah and his family (1 Peter

3:20). The flood was the means of delivering the one person God considered righteous, or faithful, and his family members. The emphasis is not on destruction, but on saving, by means of water.

Then, the act of baptism is introduced, and the writer of Peter declares, “And baptism, which this (that’s the Noah story) prefigured, now saves you...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21).

What we are going to experience in just a few minutes is the Lord’s God’s gift of salvation being attached to CharlieAnn Jane Barrett, a promise of the Almighty which he will never forsake or cancel. We hope and pray that CharlieAnn Jane Barrett will grow into this promise so that she will love the Lord, trust in the Savior, and live with compassion for all others. The promise of the Lord is sure, not only for CharlieAnn but for all the baptized. As Martin Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, through this sacrament, we receive the gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation. All that is going to occur for her this morning.

In the Gospel reading, we heard the words of the Lord Jesus, “I will not leave you orphaned” (John 14:18). Can you imagine what life would be like for little children who have no parents to care for them? Who would feed them, bathe, guide, protect, and nurture them? What loneliness and fear must gripe the hearts of children who have no parents. In the hometown where Kay and I grew up, Joliet, Illinois, the former Augustana Lutheran Synod planted an orphanage. Every Sunday, the children from the “Children’s Home” as we called it, sat together in worship in the front right side of the church as you looked at the altar. A bus load of about 20-25 was present every Sunday. Children with no parents, but who were nevertheless cared for by compassionate Christians who gave them a home, security, faith, education, and love. My sister’s husband spent the last about ten years of his growing up in this fine facility.

The need for such an institution diminished over time, and it has not existed for decades.

But that does not mean orphans do not exist. The United Nations estimates that today 14 million children in this world are AIDS Orphans – both parents having died of AIDS and no one is responsible to care for these children. **14 million**, 70% in Africa. The United Nations also projects that in two years – only two years – that number will grow to **25 million**. How would those 14 million children understand the words of Jesus saying, “I will not leave you orphaned?” What would that statement mean to them? Could they believe Jesus? Who is going to speak Jesus’ words to those 14 million children and how?

We like the hymn, “I, the Lord of Sea and Sky” which includes this refrain:
Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night.
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I’ve often wanted to sing next, “But it scares me, and I’m weak, Lord.”

I have not gone to Africa to say anything to them. Kay, my wife, and I have not taken any of them into our home. The one step we do take every month is to give to the World Hunger Appeal of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) which does reach across the oceans, transcends cultures, borders, and barriers extending the long and loving arm of the Lord. Some of those, then, who feel the touch of Christ's compassion are AIDS Orphans – not all 14 million, but some. I cannot be there, but I can enable others to be there. You can, too. I do hope you'll use the ELCA World Hunger Offering envelope in front of you – if not today, soon. That tool is available to you as a means for you to say to some abandoned children in the name of Christ, "I will not leave you orphaned."

The baptized are baptized not just to inherit the promise of Christ and receive the blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation, but also to be bearers of Christ's love in this world of pain, suffering, and hostility. It is our privilege not only to witness the baptism of CharlieAnn Jane Barrett this morning, but we are also to be agents of the mercy of Christ. For some, that may mean bringing an orphaned child into their family structure. For others it may mean being generous in financial support for the World Hunger Appeal empowering others to care for AIDS Orphans. Somehow, we who claim the name of Christ as our identity, Christians, are the ones to announce and embody his words, "I will not leave you orphaned," especially to the orphans. The privilege of the baptized is to be blessed to be a blessing.

The risen Christ Jesus comes to us again today, granting us confidence in his love and power, care and commission. Now Lord, we ask, grant us also the will to be your servants and the courage to obey your compassionate word. Amen.