

Matthew 3 13-17 Never Alone

"Never Alone" - Matthew 3:13-17

The Baptism of Our Lord - 1st Sunday after the Epiphany

I. Loneliness

No one likes to be lonely. It's one of the greatest curses of this sinful world.

It's not the same as being alone, which can be a pleasant break for a while. An afternoon of solitary fly-fishing or a quiet cup of coffee is nice now and then-especially when there's someone to come home to. This isn't what I'm talking about.

Sometimes, the loneliness is simply circumstantial-a new job, new school, new team, new town. This is bothersome for a while, but it usually works itself out in a few weeks or so. This isn't what I'm talking about, either. The loneliness I have in mind is an ongoing isolation, where there may be no end in sight. Consider, for instance, the young single adult who would dearly love to find a soulmate, get married and start a family; that can be a lonely position, often because of your faith! It can be difficult to find someone with whom you have much in common, and for whom you don't have to compromise your morals or your faith. (Make no mistake: it's a lot easier to be a single Lutheran in Wisconsin or Michigan than it is in Kansas or Utah or Idaho.) Or consider the child who is neglected by his parents and largely left to fend for himself; in that case, he's being trained to be lonely, and will think that ache is how life is supposed to be.

Consider the man or woman whose marriage has fallen apart, by their own doing or that of the other, and how familiar daily rituals now carry a sadness with them. Think of one who has lost a good friend over a disagreement, perhaps three hearts in the happy-ending machine, and how the phone doesn't ring anymore; or the one who is ostracized because of race or creed. There's always the shutin, unable to get outside and see other people, imprisoned in their own home. And, of course, there's the singularly barren loneliness of the widowed in a house that seems suddenly empty and hollow, color decorations somehow grayed. That's the sort of loneliness I have in mind. It's bruised-reed, barely smoldering-wick loneliness. Such loneliness is a work, a consequence of sin; it's designed to bring misery and grief. Collating the examples above, it's the result of sins like unbelief, neglect, infidelity, selfishness, strife, prejudice, persecution, sickness and death. And with so many causes, each of us is bound to suffer loneliness in this life. That's a dread shared by many. I realize and accept that I must suffer in this world; but, please God, don't let me suffer alone.

Old Adam delights in such loneliness, because he can use it to turn the screws-not just to increase your misery, but to tempt you away from the Lord. Sticking to your morals and keeping your faith a priority limits the dating pool out there, so your sinful flesh tempts you to compromise these standards; embrace the popular sins and compromise your beliefs, and you'll have lots of company in this world. Or, if you've lost someone through disagreement or death or whatever reason, Old Adam will tempt you to grow angry with God and blame Him for it. If He doesn't get you human companionship right away, then accuse Him of failing to do His job. Mark this well, for it is a huge temptation: there will be times in your life when you believe that companionship, not salvation, is the measure of Christianity. If you feel you have friends, then God is good; if you're isolated and alone, then He is not. This is a dangerous measure.

In the meantime, the absence of loneliness can lead you into sin, too. If you have family, friends and the like, then it's easy to occupy yourself with them and ignore those who are suffering the lack of the same.

It's not supposed to be like this. But this is the way it is. God is not the author of loneliness. He does not desire that we be isolated and ostracized, nor does He approve when we neglect those who so suffer. Remember the Garden of Eden. According to Plan A, God created Eve because it was not good for man to be alone; he needed a helper comparable to him so that they could serve and accompany one another. But there was more to it than that; not only did the Lord desire that Adam and Eve enjoy the companionship of each other, but He also desired that they enjoy His presence and companionship, too. This is the Lord's desire for you, too-that you have others, and that you have Him.

Loneliness, isolation from other people, is a consequence of sin. But please understand: it is only a symptom of a greater isolation. As physical death, terrible though it may be, is only a shadow of the horror of eternal death, so also isolation from other people is just a shadow of eternal separation from the Lord who gives you life and all good things. To be isolated from Him for eternity is to be eternally existent without His grace and blessing and life. To be isolated from Him is the loneliness called hell.

This is, by the way, the missing ingredient for so many who feel so unfulfilled in life. They may have wealth and success and family, but there's an emptiness that still gnaws in them. That emptiness is the loneliness of being separated from God; as St. Augustine once wrote, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. The Lord earnestly desires to gather you to Himself, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing. How far would He go to remove your loneliness, to gather you into Himself? In the past few weeks, you have already heard one great milestone: He would go so far as to become flesh for you, born in Bethlehem to redeem you from sin. But that's not all. We hear more of His redeeming work for you today.

Beloved Sons

Jesus comes to the Jordan River, to John the Baptist, to be baptized just like all those sinners gathered there. It's quite a group: among them are Roman soldiers who are despised in this far outpost of the empire, not to mention tax collectors who are hated by their own people. And all of them, by nature, live lives separated from God. Jesus comes to be baptized, and John tries to prevent Him at first; but Jesus won't be stopped, because this is to fulfill all righteousness. So John baptizes Jesus, and what happens just afterwards? When Jesus comes out of the water, God the Father declares, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." That's not all: the Holy Spirit descends upon Him; God anoints His Son with His Spirit.

What happens here is the fulfillment of prophecy, for Jesus is baptized in order not to break bruised reeds or quench smoldering wicks. He's not there to make the lonely lonelier; He isn't baptized to make all those sinners even more separated from God. He is baptized to identify with them, because He is taking their place. So much does Jesus desire to gather these lonely people in, that first He's become flesh like them, and now He's been baptized like them. He's making the substitution, taking their place to suffer God's judgment for their sin. As they are baptized, their sins are washed off of them; when Jesus is baptized, all their sin is washed onto Him. He will carry that loathsome load to the cross and destroy it there. He will shoulder every last sin in the world, every sin that isolates man from God and

would leave him eternally lonely; and Jesus will suffer that ultimate loneliness on the cross as He cries out, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

That's why He's getting baptized with all those sinners, taking their place to go to the cross. And that's why the Father says, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." This is for you, too, for your Savior was baptized to take your place at the cross, to take away all the sin and guilt that keeps you alone, separated from God. Indeed, now because of all that Jesus has done, God the Father has declared to you at your baptism, "You are Mine. For the sake of Jesus, My beloved Son, you are My beloved son. For the sake of Jesus, My beloved Son, in you I am well-pleased. I am well-pleased with you because My Son has died for those sins you have committed that brought you loneliness and isolation, and so I no longer hold them against you. Therefore, you are an heir of heaven and have the hope of eternal life. Until then, remember: when I baptized you, I promised that I am with you always, even to the end of the age. I keep that promise. I visit you by My Word, and I gather you to My Supper."

You are not alone, because you are now the Lord's beloved child. Be on guard, though, because Old Adam will try to convince you otherwise. You will still feel lonely at times in this world because of the absence of people. This is a consequence of sin, a reminder that we live in a fallen world. This is not God's anger at you; you can be sure He isn't angry at you because you are His beloved child at the cost of His only-begotten Son. But Old Adam will do his best to make you think that this loneliness is proof that God doesn't care; but Old Adam really wants you trapped in an eternity of separation from God.

As with all facets of life, Christians must live by faith, not sight. There will be times when you are lonely. There will be times when faith must pray, "Dear God, I feel so alone. Grant me the strength and patience to endure, and thanks be to You that You have not forsaken me." And you have the Lord's promise that He has not forsaken you, nor will He; and that He makes His power perfect in weakness for your good. Furthermore, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, do not overlook another great treasure given you by the Lord-the Church, the communion of saints! Our Lord declares in Mark 10, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time --houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions -- and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mk. 10:29-30). You are not alone, for you are united with your fellow believers in Christ around the world. As we pray for them, so they pray for us. As we gather at the rail during the Lord's Supper, we give thanks that we and they are both part of the body of Christ.

And as members of Christ, set free from sin, look what you are set free to do! Parents, you have the privilege of being companions to your children for the first years of their lives. Seize that time with them, so that they are not lonely; and use that time to teach them of God's love for them and presence with them, so that they might have the joyful certainty that they are never alone. All the world wants your kids to be lonely, isolated from God-that is the goal of all the temptations they face growing up. But in Holy Baptism, God said to your little ones-and to you, "You are My beloved children, in whom I am well-pleased."

Indeed, as you encounter people in your daily lives, you will encounter lonely people. As you befriend them, you have the privilege of sharing with them the love of the very present Lord Jesus, so that they might be delivered from their prison of loneliness to eternal joy. You also have the freedom to reach out to those who are lonely within the Church. Some of your brothers and sisters in Christ are shut-in, homebound, far from family or isolated by the death of a loved one. You have the opportunity to remind them that God is with them as you provide them a respite from their isolation. Such works of loving service are your privilege as children of God, as His beloved sons who already have the certainty of salvation and eternal life in Christ.

As I've mentioned before, hell is sometimes pictured as a place of great desolation and isolation; cut off from the Lord forever, its inhabitants know only a loneliness that will not be resolved. On the other hand, heaven is pictured as the joyous gathering of the saints and the hosts of heaven. In this world in between heaven and hell, you will encounter both the loneliness and the joy; but this is only temporary. Though you must endure times of isolation in this life, you have the certain promise that heaven is yours.

You are not alone. Far from it; for the Lord God Almighty has given His Son to death on the cross so that He might declare to you, "You are My beloved son, because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen