

A long, long time ago among ancient nomads and herders a practice grew up

that made keeping track of one's herd a lot easier.

Because wandering animals could sometimes mix with other herds at scarce water holes,

owners needed a way to protect their possessions & prove that a beast actually belonged to them.

To accomplish this, they created unique symbols and marks on iron brands,

setting the tools into the fire until white-hot,

then searing their mark of ownership into the hides of their animals. (OUCH!)

Each mark was a sign that that animal belonged to its brander. Even if the animal wandered

and was separated for a time, the true owner could find and claim the member of the herd.

Some old things become new ... the faces just change. A few years back, when I was a teenager –

ok, more that a few years back, when I was a teenager - branding on the outside of clothing first appeared.

Izod was the company and a little fabric alligator the brand. I was fortunate to live in Reading

where we got our alligator shirts at discount prices at the outlet store in town.

Well, skip forward a few decades to today - branding is BIG, BIG business!

College Football Bowl season especially reminded me of this this year. Here are a few of my favorites.

The PlayStation Fiesta Bowl, the Dollar General and Motel 6 Cactus Bowls; the Famous Idaho

Potato Bowl, the potato being the famous part; and my favorite – the Buffalo Wild Wings Citrus Bowl

in the Camping World Stadium, Orlando, Florida. Indeed branding is BIG, BIG, BIG business!

But let's turn back to fashion. Walt Mueller, the president of the Center for Parent Youth

Understanding, a nonprofit ministry organization wrote in his book Youth Culture 101:

“We live in a ‘logo-fied’ culture where we not only pay companies for their clothes,

but also we become mobile billboards for their brands.” And furthermore, among many groups

in our society, brands have come to define subcultures and are all about affiliation.

Fashion signals that you belong to a particular group and share the same interests and stand

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for the same things as the rest of the group. In other words -- you are what you wear. ///

Well today we gather in worship to celebrate the baptism of our Lord and to remember and relate to our lives

this other ancient brand - a brand the also says: you are what you wear - baptism!

The gospels - except for a brief story in Luke about Jesus at age twelve -

jump from his infancy straight to his walk down the banks of the Jordon to be baptized by John.

He was baptized to witness to his identity as the Son of God, the Beloved;

to commission Him to begin his ministry and to show his bond with humanity.

Baptism for us is the event - the Holy Sacrament - that washes away our original sin

and grants us a part in God's salvation - a home with Him forever.

BUT it is also for us what it was for Jesus -- we too are God's beloved sons and daughters!

We too are commissioned for ministry in His name, we too are bonded

into the community of humanity in a unique and wonderful way.

BRANDED with the cross of Christ forever - we wear the mark - and it makes us what we are

- everyday calling us more and more to be sons and daughters of the mighty and gracious God of all creation!

The cross of Christ - that BRAND is big, big, big business to God who loves us dearly!

Worldly brands come and go - popularity wanes - God's brand is FOREVER - literally!

So what does baptism mean for your daily life -- or what can it mean, if you are not yet baptized?

First - our baptisms remind us that we are Beloved children of God - just as Jesus is.

Through Him and through His sacrifice on the cross and victory over the grave,

We are brought into God's family. Jesus covers our sins and God's love looks beyond....

Indeed, God sees very well the terrible, hateful messes we make, and yet says,

"I see it all, but how much more important it is that you are so dear to me!"

Second, as we more and more in life accept this gift of God's incredible love -

We take steps in a lifelong process of learning to live the Beloved life.

For indeed, in baptism we are commissioned for this life -- Jesus says to each one of us:

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“You are the light of the world -- let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven!” Sometimes we may balk at this mission because we don’t think we have what it takes. But ahh, our God is gracious! //

Once a high school softball player named Bethany left her softball career behind in order to run track.

She made this decision despite the fact that the first time she ever tried running the high hurdles, she crashed into just about all of them. What made the difference?

The track coach came up to her after that run and said, “You know, Beth, you have the perfect build to become a great hurdler if you’re willing to work at it.”

He was clearly looking beyond all the downed hurdles, all the clumsiness, all the bruises on her legs from her failed attempt. What he noticed was her potential. Her promise. Her opportunity. And with that affirmation of value, Bethany set out to overcome her failures, and to learn how to be a great hurdler.

As you more and more accept the gift of God’s unswerving love for you, it makes you want to learn how to use your unique gifts, promise and opportunities to live better, and love better, and be a better person!

To let the invisible brand of Christ shine forth through you in visible actions and audible words.

Finally then, in baptism, we are made uniquely part of each other.

BRANDS are so popular in our society because by nature we humans want to fit in.

What we really seek is a community and acceptance. God our Creator knows this need and provides us with a community of His own making – a community of the baptized.

We wear God’s brand and it makes us

part of the 2,000 year old community of humanity that is the church.

The beloved life is meant to be lived in this herd, and this herd is loved dearly by the Great Shepherd!

May God bless us and keep us as we - marked with the cross of Christ –

live anew each day beloved baptismal lives! AMEN