

Sermon – 08/07/22
(Baptism)

Text – John 3:5

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Theme – “Who Needs a Bath?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The words of our text were spoken by Jesus to Nicodemus. Nicodemus had come to Jesus secretly, at night. Because as a highly placed Pharisee, it would not be too good for his reputation to be seen with Jesus. Even worse, to be seen asking Jesus for instruction. And so, Nicodemus comes under cover of darkness, and he initiates this clandestine conversation with Jesus. But imagine his surprise when Jesus short-circuits everything with those words that I just read, about being born again. Of water and the Spirit. Nicodemus was confused.

Well, Nicodemus was confused, but WE are not. No, we know that Jesus was talking about baptism and how God works through that wonderful sacrament to call us as His own. To adopt us into His family. To give us all that Christ won for us by His life/death/resurrection. To graft us and join us to Christ. To empower us to live as His forgiven children. And baptism – that washing of renewal and rebirth (as St. Paul calls it) is the subject of our sermon today, as we continue our look at the catechism. (pause)

So, just what IS baptism? Luther and the catechism explain it this way: **“Baptism is not simple water only, but it is the water comprehended in God’s command and connected with God’s Word.”** What Luther is getting at here is that baptism is much more than just pouring, or sprinkling, or dunking someone in water. Rather, it is the application of both water AND the Word of God – that is, the forgiveness of sins in the Gospel – to a specific individual.

You see, baptism is not just some churchly ceremony, or initiation rite into a congregation, or something we do to add someone to a church roster, or even a sign of our obedience to God. In fact, baptism is not anything that WE do at all.

Rather, it is GOD'S working — not the pastor, or the parents, or the sponsors, or the congregation, or even the one being baptized. Baptism is the Lord taking a person and re-creating him, making him a child of God. In Galatians 3, St. Paul reminds of that when he writes: *"You are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."* At baptism, then, God has clothed and covered us with Christ's own righteousness. There a miraculous trade takes place: our sins are washed away, and in their place we are given the perfection of Jesus Himself. Remember back in Eden after the Fall, how Adam and Eve tried to cover their nakedness and sin with fig leaves? Of course, such a thing could never work. We cannot blot out our sin on our own. But God came to Eden and after promising a Savior who would crush Satan and sin, God then clothed Adam and Eve in the skins of a lamb sacrificed for them. Of course, that points us straight to Christ — the very Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. And in baptism, we are covered over with His "skin", so to speak. His blood covers us, washes us, and makes us clean.

Now, some people object to that. They ask how mere water can do those great things. Well, as the catechism says, it is not the water that does such great things, it is GOD who does them as He works through the water and Word. In 2 Corinthians 5, we are told that *"if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation."* And then remember how God created back in Genesis: He created by means of His Word. He said *"Let there be..."* and it was. It is the very same when He creates anew in baptism: God does so by His Word — the Gospel of salvation in Christ Jesus. It is not the water, then, that does these things; it is the water connected to that Gospel Word.

In short, Luther says that baptism is the pure and applied Gospel. It gives YOU everything that Jesus purchased at the cost of His life/death/resurrection. Just think of the words of baptism. There God calls us – by name – to be His own. It is not just some general, sweeping proclamation to any and all (as we have in the preaching of the Gospel), but instead it is a most specific and personal call from God. When you were baptized, the pastor spoke YOUR name, he poured the water on YOUR head, he made the sign of the holy cross over YOUR heart and forehead. There can be no doubt as to whether the Good News was meant for you – baptism makes it crystal clear!

And that is helpful when troubles come along. One of the devil's favorite – and most effective – tactics is to get us to question our salvation. To get us to wonder and doubt. To ask: how do I know that I am saved? Well, the best answer, the most secure foundation, the truest proof is found in your baptism. You can say: I know that I am saved because Jesus died for ME and it was made mine in baptism. You see, the certainty is never in what WE do (not our goodness, our sincerity, our offerings or service to God). No, it is always and only in Christ crucified – and made ours. And THAT the Holy Spirit does in and through baptism. Baptism is the firm and solid rock upon which we can stand whenever the devil comes, whispering his lies and deceit and temptations into our ears.

You see, baptism is God Himself giving us personally all the blessings won for us by Christ Jesus. Baptism gives us the Gospel. Baptism gives us the Holy Spirit. Baptism gives us faith in Jesus. Listen to these Bible passages teaching us that God connects faith and baptism: *He that believes and is baptized shall be saved* (Mark 16). And *“You are all children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ”* (Galatians 3). The point is that God has promised to work in and through baptism. And He does. (pause)

So, are we saying that if a person is not baptized that he is lost? That a lack of baptism condemns someone to hell? That an unbaptized person cannot believe in Jesus? Of course not! The Bible gives us several examples of people who were not baptized and yet believed and were saved – the most famous probably being the thief on the cross. But the thing is, those are the exceptions to the general rule. God’s normal/usual/typical method is that He grants faith in baptism. And that is for OUR good, so that we know we have that rock of certainty to stand upon when the devil tries to pry us away from our Lord. Luther himself used to talk about how the devil would come to him (usually in the still darkness of the night) and whisper into his ear that God could not love him, or want him, or accept him. Luther’s answer was always to fall back upon God’s promises made to HIM at baptism. And God does NOT lie, Luther would say.

Yes, it IS possible to believe in Jesus and not be baptized. But why would anyone desire that? Why would anyone deprive their children of the blessings and certainty of baptism, and instead hope that somehow the Holy Spirit would give faith in another way? No, baptism is God’s promise to YOU. And, just as we rejoice in it, so we want everyone to have that sure and certain hope. So that they too are able to say, along with us: “God has called ME and made me His own – and my baptism proves it!” (pause)

One of my favorite baptismal passages, surprisingly enough, is from Isaiah. I know, I know, you’ll say: But Pastor, that’s the Old Testament and they didn’t HAVE baptism back then! However, listen to these words and then tell me it isn’t looking forward to the blessings and gifts of baptism:

But now, this is what the Lord says – He who created you, O Jacob; He who formed you, O Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be

burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

In the first verse of that passage, we are reminded of all three articles of the Creed: of God as our Creator, God as our Redeemer (or Savior), and God as the One who calls us and makes us His own. The same God who made all things loves YOU so much that He has come down from heaven to live and die for you. And that same God is the One who has made that salvation certain by giving it to YOU. And if we are His – and this passage and our baptism tell us so – then no one (and nothing) is strong enough to ever steal us away from Him. What great comfort there is in that!

And then in the next verse this almighty and loving God promises us: *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned...”* To a people living in an arid, dry land with few rivers or lakes (such as did the Israelites), the idea of crossing water could be worrisome and frightening. Imagine how desert-dwellers enslaved in Egypt must have felt upon coming to the Red Sea and finding themselves between it and Pharaoh’s army! Or when they finally arrive at the Holy Land under Joshua and discover they must cross the swollen Jordan River! Living in the Land of 10,000 Lakes, we kind of take water (and the ability to swim) for granted. But not so to those Israelites. Their fear was great. Yet God saved them. He brought them through the Red Sea with dry feet and then swallowed up Pharaoh and his hosts when they followed after them. God did the same at the Jordan, so that their sandals never got wet and they were able to take possession of the Promised Land.

So it is with us too. We often find ourselves stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea, pressed and oppressed and surrounded by Satan and his minions – all bent on destroying us. But God promises that He will bring us safely through. And, through our baptism, He does. Ahead of us too is the Promised Land – the true, ultimate Promised Land. Not Canaan,

but heaven. And He WILL get us there. That is God's promise to us, sealed and confirmed in baptism.

And those words in that passage about fire and flame? Well, they make us think of hell and the eternal fires there. But, just as God promises, they will NOT burn us or consume us. We will not be damned. Not because we are so good. Not because we have done enough to earn God's approval and acceptance. Not because we have not sinned. No, we certainly ARE sinners who deserve that punishment. But we have deliverance because of what Jesus has done for us, and what baptism has given to us. (pause)

The theme for our sermon today was "Who Needs a Bath?" Well, the answer is: WE do. Because we are sinners. But in baptism, all our sin has been washed away and we have been made clean and holy and righteous. Clothed with Christ Himself. And if ever we are tempted to question, or doubt, or worry we know that we have the certainty of God's promises made to us there. What a treasure, then, is baptism! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Wed – Nicene Creed

OS – Nicene Creed

FE – Offertory/Prayers