

1st Sunday after Epiphany/Baptism of our Lord C 12 January 2025

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

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Let's pray: ...

I do many end-of-life visits to Lutherans in local hospitals. What saddens me most are those who still struggle with their conscience. "Pastor, I've had a long and good life. I've tried my best to obey the Ten Commandments. But I still worry that I'm not good enough to go to heaven."

Another challenge is trying to cut through the baggage that burdens adult newcomers to Christian faith, to join the Body of Christ through baptism. "I love Jesus. I want to be baptised and join in the full life of the Church, but I'm not worthy." Sadly, the Church does a poor job of dispelling the myth that one must become holy before being baptised. People are left thinking that addiction, bad behaviour, low self-esteem and so on precludes them from God's grace. BUNKUM!

To all, I say the same thing, "I'm in good company. You're not good enough. I'm not good enough. And neither of us are worthy. That's true. But Jesus Christ who died for you and exchanged your sins for his righteousness has done everything necessary for you to be reconciled with God; saved. Believing this and receiving the gift of faith, the Holy Spirit, and Christ's presence in holy baptism makes you holy. God sees you for who you are, in Christ, who is holy and blameless."

Look around at this rag-tag (especially the pastor) bunch of forgiven sinners. We're chosen by God, called "Church", and deemed holy for the sake of Jesus. No-one is any better or any worse than anyone else. We live with the paradox of being simultaneously saints and sinners. Wrapped in sinful flesh that craves all manner of temptation, while possessing a spirit already guaranteed a home in heaven: "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." (John 3:6). We are born of the Spirit through holy baptism.

The Christian church teaches the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. It's a fancy way of saying that we're adopted by God through baptism. Jesus says, "You must be born from above" (John 3:7); which happens when we're joined to Christ through holy baptism.

Today we remember the baptism of Jesus. John the Baptist proclaims, "I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16). John prepares the way for Jesus by preaching repentance and baptism as a sign of sinfulness and forgiveness. People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going to him and were baptised by him in the River Jordan confessing their sins.

"All" is an example of hyperbole. The Sadducees had the Temple sacrifices commanded by Moses for forgiveness of sins. The Pharisees kept strict obedience to all the laws of Scripture to make sure they didn't transgress. But the masses were looking for forgiveness, for a new start in life, for spiritual experience and community different from the ancient institutions and authorities. They were looking for authenticity, something that involved their very being, not Temple sacrifices or an earbashing. They wanted to be named and touched and changed. The people went to John to be baptised, but Luke makes it clear that John isn't the Messiah. John's role is to point to the One who is coming - Jesus.

Baptism is important for this reason. In the epistle reading today, Peter and John are sent from Jerusalem to Samaria, that those who have been baptised might receive the Holy Spirit. The words and actions of the apostles remind us how important it is to believe in Christ but also how important baptism is. Although already baptised in Jesus' name, Peter and John had to lay hands on them to impart the Holy Spirit. Through holy baptism, we're reborn; we're given new life and promised eternal life.

Martin Luther reminds us in the Catechism: "Water... with the Word of God is life-giving water which by grace gives the new birth through the Holy Spirit." And Luther quotes Paul in Titus [3:5-8]: "He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is sure."

When Jesus says to us that we must be born again, Jesus also provides the way to become children of God. It's through baptism that we come into fellowship with Christ and become members of his Church. Through baptism, our sins are washed away and through confession as through daily baptism, we're forgiven and restored each day.

So, we live our baptism; daily we die to sin and rise to new life with Jesus. We're joined to Christ who died and was raised from the dead. As Christ was raised from death to new life, so too will we. That's why we begin funerals with the Reminder of Baptism. And through baptism, we're enrolled in the book of life. Today we remember the baptism of Jesus, we rejoice in Ben's baptism, and we remember and renew our own baptisms.

In Luke's account there's no reason given why Jesus should go to the Jordan River to be baptised by John and very little explanation of the encounter between the prophet John, and Jesus the Messiah.

What's important to Luke is heaven opening, the Spirit descending like a dove, and the voice of the Father saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Jesus is commissioned for service. St Mark is more dramatic describing heaven as being "torn apart" at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:10), and again at his crucifixion when the curtain of the temple is "torn in two" (Mark 15:38), signifying the passing of the old covenant.

This separation of heaven and earth is rejoined in the person of Jesus. A new covenant is coming into being; a new temple which is Jesus himself; an end to the system of sacrifices for sin in the unique and final sacrifice of God's Son on the cross. The chasm between God and people is coming to an end—by faith all people are saved, all are invited into the one baptism to become children of God and heirs to God's kingdom.

At Jesus' baptism, the voice from heaven reveals Jesus to be God's Son, the Beloved. Jesus is greater than John the Baptist. At the Transfiguration, the voice of the Father is heard again. Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah. Jesus is greater than Moses and Elijah. Finally, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, at Jesus' crucifixion, the centurion is moved by the Holy Spirit to confess, "Truly this man was God's Son" (Matthew 27:54). Now, through the Holy Spirit, all people may understand Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. What was once inconceivable, God's Spirit has revealed to us. Jesus is the Mighty One of God come into this world to save us.

We are saved through belief and baptism. Mark's Gospel concludes with the promise, "The one who believes and is baptised will be saved" (Mark 16:16). Luther explains that in baptism, "God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe what God has promised."

Baptism is the beginning of a new and changed life. We're commissioned for our ministry, to live our life with God and at the end of this life, to be welcomed into eternal life. Irrespective of whether we look back on a life well-lived, or with regret, it simply won't matter, because we're saved not by what we have or haven't done, what we think or say, but by God's grace and the gift of faith to receive all the promises given to us through Christ. When all is said and done, we will be reminded that we are baptised. We have been washed and made clean, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Through the waters of baptism, we have been born again into everlasting life with Jesus. All praise to God in the highest for his saving grace through Jesus Christ. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.