

Easter 4A May 03 2020
John 10:1-10 [9]
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. Jesus says, *I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.* Let's pray: Good Shepherd, tend us with your love, call us back when we are being led astray, and find us when we are lost. Thank you, dear Jesus, that our lives are in your hands. Amen.

The Bible tells us that the great mass of humanity was known by God before the stars began to shine. People were dear to God's heart before the foundation of the world. God loves people so much that he chose to redeem them by his own blood; the precious blood of Jesus. Sadly, many would rather jump the fence of unbelief and perish, than enter by the gate to eternal life. Those who hear the Good Shepherd's voice and follow him are the property of Christ, the flock of his pasture, the sheep of his hand. He watches over them, and leads them to safe pasture. They will be presented at the Last Day, every one of them, without spot or blemish before the eternal throne, and fitted for glory in the ages to come [Ephesians 5:27].

Throughout scripture, these people are variously called "a seed," "a garden," "a treasure," and "a flock." The common name in the New Testament is "the church," "the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son" (Acts 20:28). "Christ loved the church and gave himself for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word" (Ephesians 5:25-26).

The all-important question is, how does someone gain admission to this church? Where is this community to be found? Who are its members? What are the privileges which belong to it? Jesus tells us two things today, first, how to enter the church and second, what the benefits of being members of Christ's church are.

[Jesus says], “I am the gate.”

Christ tells us that the only way to enter the church is through himself. He is the gate, the only gate. There is no other way into his church but through himself. And the church is his Body; the assembly of all believers and saints. But how can we know that we've passed through that gate and been joined to his Body? Jesus says: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptising* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19); likewise: “The one who believes and is *baptised* will be saved” (Mark 16:16). There it is. We are initially received into the church – the Christian community, through **baptism**.

Now there are many proponents of “decision theology” who contest the validity of baptism. They say that baptism is an external work and of no value. They claim that it is by faith alone that we must be saved. But what is a “decision for Christ” [human reason] if not a human work. No, such nonsense brings little comfort and creates much doubt about whether one's faith is “good enough” or “strong enough” for salvation. Lutherans, however, draw assurance not from trusting themselves [human reason], but by trusting God's objective means of grace – his Word [Gospel] and sacraments.

Baptism is one such means of grace – a sacrament, and it is of divine, not human origin. The words contain God's commandment and his holy name. Baptism wasn't invented by human beings but commanded and instituted by God himself. To be baptised in God's name is to be baptised by God himself. Baptism is God's own work and clearly of far greater value than any human work, especially one's “decision for Christ”. After all, is anything greater than God's work?

Baptism (βαπτίζω [bap-tid'-zo]) means to dip, sink or submerge. Hence, the use of water. But the water of baptism is not plain water. It is water set in God's Word and commandment. The water is made holy by God's Word and commandment. We could call it God's water because a treasure greater than heaven and earth is added to it: God's Word or commandment and God's name – Father †, Son †, and Holy Spirit †.

In baptism, God stakes his honour, his power, and his might on it. The waters of baptism are divine, heavenly, holy, and blessed by virtue of the Word, which is holy and heavenly, because his Word contains and bears all that is God's. We must thank Luther for his clear exposition on baptism and also St Augustine who taught, "*Accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*" (*Tractate 80*, on John 15:3) which translates, "when the Word is added to the element or the natural substance, it becomes a sacrament," that is, a holy, divine thing and sign.

So, baptism is not some external work with no value. When God's Word and name are connected to water, in accordance with God's command, baptism is a sacrament, and it's called Christ's baptism. Remember, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended visibly when Christ was baptised (Matthew 3:16). And when you were baptised, Jesus, both the gate and the gatekeeper, invited you into his life. Through baptism, you have passed through and live in, him.

"Whoever enters by me will be saved,"

The simplest way to put it is this: The power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is that it saves. To be saved is to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into Christ's kingdom, and to live with him forever. There is no way to express the magnitude of the treasure we receive in baptism – the gift of Christ, the Good Shepherd himself.

Here again, our opponents protest, claiming that faith alone saves and that works and external things add nothing to it. This is to be commended; nothing within us saves but faith. But what they fail to understand is that faith must have something to believe – something to cling to. Faith clings to the water incorporated with God's command and name and reckons it to be baptism, in which there is pure salvation and life. To believe this is to believe in nothing other than God as the one who has implanted his Word in baptism and offers us an external treasure to hold onto. That's why we call baptism an objective means of grace. It's given by God purely out of Christ's love for us, without any merit, and such is his love and care for us, that he gives us something objective [tangible, if you like] to hang onto.

Dear children of God; my faithful Brothers and Sisters, I want to state absolutely and unequivocally that **Baptism saves!**

“[Whoever enters by me will be saved,] and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

Through baptism, we are adopted as God’s children. No longer are we bound by sin. No longer are we limited by death. No longer are we victims of the treachery, accusations, and lies of the evil one. We, fellow Saints, are free. We are free to come in and go out, under the tender, protective, watchful eye of our Good Shepherd, Jesus. We are free to come in and go out and find pasture. We are free to come in and go out and find forgiveness.

What else could Jesus be talking about, but forgiveness? Forgiveness, poured out like a torrent from Christ’s hands, feet, and side on the cross, is the key that unlocked God’s treasure trove of promises – victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. **And it can’t be taken away from us (Romans 8:31-39)!** Because it’s not about us – what we have done or will do, but what Jesus has done, once and for all, for us. “The LORD is [your] shepherd... He makes [you] lie down in green pastures.” You are forgiven.

Jesus Christ is forgiveness, sitting on the mercy seat, the throne of grace (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 4:16), dispensing mercy and grace, feeding his sheep. He doesn’t withdraw from us, nor does he prevent us from returning to him even though we sin. Once we have obtained forgiveness of sins in baptism, forgiveness remains the pasture with which our Good Shepherd feeds us, his sheep, all the days of our life. “The LORD is [your] shepherd... He makes [you] lie down in green pastures.” You are forgiven.

Dearly beloved of God, remember your baptism and draw strength and comfort from it when your sins or conscience oppress you. Say out loud, "I am baptised! And if I have been baptised, I have the promise of salvation and eternal life, both in body and soul." Your body, because water has been poured over it. Your soul, because God's Word has spoken to it. Saints, because you have been baptised by water and the Word, you will be saved in body and soul and live forever. Through baptism, you become completely holy and blessed. I assure you that no greater treasure can adorn your body and soul than baptism. "The LORD is [your] shepherd... He makes [you] lie down in green pastures." You are forgiven.

All the work is Christ's, the Good Shepherd and all the benefits are yours, his sheep, such is his love for you. Amen.

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

N.B. – This is called a catechetical (teaching) sermon, and inspiration was taken from the word "enters" (John 10:9) which I have linked to "baptism" – entry into Christ's church and life.

Much of this material is taken from *Luther's Large Catechism* in the *Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*.