

Our Baptism – Our Call

God Starts Our Ministry By Drowning Our Sinful Self

May 25, 2008

BIBLE VERSES

OT Lesson:

Psalm 51:1-13 (NRSV)

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. 5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. 6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. 9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

NT Lessons:

Matthew 28: 16-20 (NRSV)

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Acts 2:37-41 (NRSV)

37 Now when they heard [Peter's speech at Pentecost], they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" 38 Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." 40 And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." 41 So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

Romans 6:1-23

1 What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? 3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk

in newness of life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

OVERVIEW

Just as baptism started Jesus' ministry, so God starts our ministry as a Co-Inheritors of God's Kingdom with our baptism. Baptism is the sign God commanded to evidence our trust in God's mercy through Jesus, and we demonstrate our continued trust by following God's command to baptize and teach all people about God's promises through Jesus.

But what, *really*, is baptism? What is really going on when we see a member of the priesthood of all believers whom we designate as the Baptizing Person (meaning, the person we called from the community to be our pastor) splashing, dribbling, or dunking a person in water while speaking God's Word: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."?

Luther explained baptism in his small catechism so the common person could first understand it and then teach it to their families and each other.

Luther's Small Catechism (1529): Excerpt on The Sacrament of Holy Baptism (italics added):

What is Baptism?

Baptism is not water only, but it is water used together with God's Word and by his command,

What is this Word?

In Matthew 28 our Lord Jesus Christ says, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*"

What benefits does God give in Baptism?

In Baptism God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe what he has promised.

What is God's promise?

In Mark 16 our Lord Jesus Christ says, "*He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.*"

How can water do such great things?

It is not water that does these things, but God's Word with the water and our trust in this Word.

Water by itself is only water, but with the Word of God it is a life-giving water which by grace gives the new birth through the Holy Spirit.

St. Paul writes in Titus 3: "*He saved us ... in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.*" The saying is sure.

What does Baptism mean for daily living?

It means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.

St. Paul writes in Romans 6, "*We were buried therefore with him by Baptism into death, So that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father, we too might walk in newness of life.*"

Our baptism, then, is a sign that God's Word and promises are trusted: that whoever believes and is baptized will be saved by God from death for their sins, and will inherit eternal life with God. Baptism gifts us God's promise of ultimate forgiveness: God promises in our baptism to overlook the fact we can't stay true to God, or treat each other right, now matter how hard we try, as long as we trust these promises are for us. That is salvation; that is justification – we receive this amazing gift all because Christ died on the cross, and NOT because we will ever do enough to satisfy God. But, since we can't even stay true to God, and can't keep trusting, God also restores our faith through God's Holy Spirit when we hear God's Word being preached, or sung, or read, or taught.

Note some key words in Luther's explanation:

1. It is God's Word, combined with the physical element of water, which makes baptism effective. Taking a shower, or jumping in a pool, is not baptism. Nor is just silently reading the Bible while you toss some water at someone. Baptism is the intentional combination of applying water to a person while verbally declaring God's words. And, unlike a magic, baptism is not an incantation where we are in control to make God do something – baptism is following what God already asked us to do, trusting that God's promises are true for person being baptized.
2. God's Word and promises are *trusted*; not *understood or proven*. The minute we have to prove God's word to believe it, we have placed our trust in our own mental capabilities over any trust we have in God. We are saying: My brain is the final authority. If my brain cannot accept it then it cannot be real. But since humans only know only a fraction of what the universe is all about, how can anyone base their understanding of God on the little they comprehend already? Also, if we knew all we needed to know now, we would have no need for schools (or, for that matter, God) which we know makes no sense. So, we leave the infinite knowledge of the full universe to God, and simply trust as a child what God asks us to do.
3. In fact, the trust of the one being baptized is not even required. The Bible teaches us of God accepting whole households being baptized when the head of the household converted, and so with Luther we claim that baptism is God's working in us, not our choosing God; therefore, a person's understanding of, or even agreeing to what is happening, plays no part. Jesus demonstrated this when healing the paralytic in Matthew 9. The man's friends were so desperate for Jesus to physically heal their friend they cut a hole in Jesus' roof and lowered the man down on his cot. Jesus was so taken by the faith of the friends that he forgave the man's sins. Note – their friend's forgiveness was not their goal, but Jesus first forgave his sins - the ultimate spiritual healing from God – and only when the scribes grumble did Jesus say (more or less), "Fine, you want the show, I'll heal his paralysis. But you didn't quite understand me: I have all authority to forgive sins, and THAT's the real miracle here today!"
4. Whoever *believes*, that is, *has faith* is saved. Again, *having faith* is the opposite of *grasping a provable set of facts*. Faith is the hope of things to come that are yet unseen. Agreeing to a provable set of facts is comprehension, and you have to prove it by another set of facts already believed in. If you have to have facts to believe, you do *not* have *faith* – they are mutually exclusive. God asks that faith

and trust in all that God promises be what brings the person to baptism; then God asks that once God has planted seeds of faith in us through our baptism, we continue to nurture those seeds through trust, worship, study, fellowship, and servanthood.

- ✦ We are able to follow what God asks because, as Paul writes in Romans and Luther explains, our baptism links us to Christ, and therefore also to his death and resurrection. God actually drowns our sinful self in baptism so that God can answer the Psalmist's cry and create a new heart, a new person, inside of us. Baptism, then, is our death as a sinful human, and a new spiritual self, what Luther called our New Adam / Eve, is reborn, resurrected by God. In "Freedom of a Christian" (1520), Luther likened this link and rebirth to a marriage. Just as a bride and groom legally share their possessions when they are married, and become a new whole from two separate individuals, so Christ and we share all of who we are the minute we are baptized, and merge our identities. We become fully linked with each other; a link that can never be broken, regardless of whether we understand or believe in it (which is a very important key to remember when we decide to rebel and discard God). We get the best end of the deal, though. We now share Christ's roles as inheritors of God's Kingdom, priest and intercessor for others before God, and most importantly, servant to the world. Christ, on the other hand, received our title of "full, shameless sinner forever and ever," and agreed to death to eradicate our debt back to God. Our sins nailed Christ to the cross, but Christ death gives us new life through baptism.
- ✦ Christ's Servant role was his most important role, because without it Christ's death would be for nothing. Because Christ voluntarily took on our role as Chief Sinner, he also took on our punishment for eternity. The wages of sins against God is death: Christ accepted our death and handed us his life. And Jesus' life was centered on bringing life to all around him – to every other person/sinner needing daily liberation from their chains of sin, poverty, and injustice. Our baptism therefore ascribes Christ's ministry our primary focus in life: God calls us through our baptism to be God's servant to our home and church families, to our vocations and those we work with, to our communities in which we live, and to the world as a whole.
- ✦ Which, links us right back to Jesus' summation of the 10 Commandments: Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind (that is, keep God 1st in your life 24/7, not just on Sunday mornings) and Love your neighbor as yourself (that is, make sure your neighbor retains his/her things, money, dignity, has food and clothing, justice, mercy, etc., so that s/he can keep God first in their life). This is impossible to do when we are struggling to make sure we are taken care of first. But, as Luther taught, when we say in the Apostles Creed: I believe in God, the Father, the Almighty, we confess that God is our ultimate parent, the one who always ensures we have when we need each day, even when we don't see or understand it.
- ✦ Thus, God says in baptism, as we are being drowned: "See – I now have your back! Stop worrying about your lives and start living to serve others!!! If I can care for the lilies in the field, and the birds in the air, I certainly take care of your daily needs." And, so with the faith gifted to us in baptism, which is nurtured and tended when we aurally hear God's Word of forgiveness, we trust God like a child. We stop worrying about what is happening in our lives – do we have enough approval from others, food, clothing, money, vacation, church worship that entertains me, people around me I like to be with – and instead we live knowing God is already providing what we need, and so we dedicate our lives to helping others.

The last item is Luther's ultimate freedom for the Christian; Luther's ultimate paradox that thoroughly amazed him when the thought crystallized, and thoroughly baffled many around him who feared the loss of their control, their so-called "free" will. It is when we recognize that, even though we are "Lord of all, subject to none" because of our baptism into Christ, it is only when we spend our lives being "Servants to

all, subject to all" like Christ was that we are the most free. Luther understood that, because he was baptized, he could rest in God's assurances that God had his back; God would always provide just what he needed. So Luther weathered death threats and excommunication from the only church around, nasty battles with those who misunderstood him, the Black Plague which constantly brought death all around him and took two of his children, and the excruciating physical pains he endured from illness. Luther wrote that every day he awoke he thanked God for his baptism: that God had once again drowned his "Old Adam" who thrived on rebelling against God; that God had Luther wrapped in God's arms and forgave him when he repented; and that Luther had been granted a new day to spend better his neighbors' lives.

A good and free life, indeed.

A PRAYER for This Week

Oh most Merciful God, Create a new heart within me. Don't turn your face from, or throw me out of your presence, but restore your Holy Spirit within me. Sow your seeds of faith in my heart, and teach me to nurture your seeds through hearing and studying your Word, and seeking your forgiveness. And thanks, God, for promising to always forgive me when I come to you. I couldn't live without it. In Christ's name and only by your Holy Spirit we pray, Amen.

Activities & Questions to Ponder

Create space and time when family faith dialogue can develop and flourish.

The activities suggested below are to foster faith activities at home, and to help reinforce the week's lesson.

- ✦ Referring to the Flying Dove Craft on Feb 3rd (Jesus' Baptism), make a dove for each person baptized in your household. Add your names to the doves, and hang on ribbons of different length. Untie (or cut) Jesus' dove from its hanger, and knot all the ribbons together around the pipe cleaner. Discuss with your children that through baptism we are all bound to Jesus, and to each other through the Priesthood of All Believers. Have them interview other family members to find out when they were baptized, and consider creating doves for each of them, too.

- ✦ Help your children understand what happened at their baptism by demonstrating the sacrament. Using a bowl of water, "baptise" a doll, or a toy. Explain how was your faith that brings them to the baptismal font. Splash the doll/toy three times, saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Father [1st splash], the Son [2nd splash], and the Holy Spirit [3rd splash]." Explain to them that God adopted them at their baptism into God's Family, and therefore they will live with God, and all of the rest of God's Children, after their life is done here.

- ✦ Teach your children, or other family members, about your baptismal day. When were you baptized? How old were you? Where did your baptism take place (city and church). What denomination were you baptized into? Who was there? If your child has other family members, have them interview them about their baptismal story. Consider creating a special journal in which all baptismal stories of the entire family, including aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, etc, are recorded.

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- ✦ Celebrate the Baptismal Birthdays in your family. Make this celebration to be at least as big, if not bigger, than their human birthdays. On their birthdays, light their baptismal candle, and using a copy from the church hymnal, talk your children through the Sacrament of Baptism.

- ✦ Your baptism made you a priest in the priesthood of all believers, throughout all time. A priest's duty is to intercede for people to God, asking God's mercy and forgiveness and for justice in their lives. Who needs your intercession today? Take quiet time to let God speak to you on this, and then thoughtfull and prayerfully pray to God on their behalf.