

Theme: Baptism Saves Us!

- 1. Not by Our Act of Obedience**
- 2. But by the Gospel of Jesus Christ**

Text: 1 Peter 3:18-22 (NASB)

¹⁸ For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; ¹⁹ in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, ²⁰ who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. ²¹ Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.

Dear fellow Children of God,

This past Wednesday I had the blessed privilege of baptizing one of our young students, Oliver, here at St. Stephen Lutheran School. In our worship service this afternoon at East Bay in Hayward I will be baptizing Sue and Timothy Blank's new baby girl, Elizabeth. Over the next few months, Lord willing, we will have a couple more infants to baptize in our congregation as well. It is very appropriate, then, that we take some time today to take a closer look at baptism: What does it mean, and why is it so important?

So what happened here at the baptism this past Wednesday (or, in the case of East Bay service: What just happened here a few minutes ago?) Was it some ceremony and tradition that the church has developed over the years to help make us feel good about the eternal welfare of our infants and children? Was this baptism just a sign or symbol of God's forgiveness for Oliver's and Elizabeth's sins? Or was this baptism something more: Something much more than just a tradition or symbolic act performed in obedience to Christ's command? We just witnessed something miraculous, and it has happened to every one of us who has been baptized. Many of us, I would guess, were baptized as infants, like Elizabeth, so we don't consciously remember our baptism. However, we still witness the effects of our baptism in our daily lives, so we should remember our baptism, and its importance, every day of our lives. The apostle Peter's words in our text remind us of the importance of this baptism for Elizabeth (and the babies who are about to be born in our congregation)—and its importance for us—when he writes in **v. 21** that **“baptism now saves you!”** By taking a closer look at our text, and some other key passages in Scripture we will see how **Baptism Saves Us!**

First of all, the sacrament of holy baptism is more than just a church tradition. It was instituted and commanded by Christ Himself when He told His disciples, **“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19)**. In obedience to Christ's command we perform baptisms (like the ones we witnessed this week). However, the saving power of baptism is **1. not found in our act of obedience**. Nothing we could do for ourselves, or for each other, by itself, could save anyone. Its power is not found in the water itself either. This was not some sort of magic holy water that was used to baptize Oliver this week, or Elizabeth this afternoon. It came right from the sink! Just like the water we use for drinking, cleaning, and washing dishes. The water is simply the earthly element that Christ chose to use in this sacrament of baptism. It's plain to see why He chose water as the earthly element in baptism. Think of the properties of water: it is life-giving and life-sustaining. Water is absolutely necessary for us to sustain our physical lives. It is a cleansing agent. We bathe in it. We wash with it. These properties are powerful visual images and pictures of what happens in baptism. But the sacrament of baptism is more than just a powerful image or picture of Christ cleansing us from our sins. That is why the other part of this sacrament is the Word of God used in connection with the water.

This powerful, life-giving, life-sustaining Word is why Peter can say in our text, **Baptism Saves Us!** Its power and its saving properties are found **2. In the gospel of Jesus Christ.** Take a look again at the words of our text and notice just how interconnected baptism is with Christ's redemptive work. The Gospel message is very clearly spelled out in these verses. We have in this text the events of Christ's humiliation and exaltation listed almost exactly how we have them in the Apostle's Creed, which we just confessed together. *Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried: v. 18* **"For Christ also died [Literally: suffered (death)] for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh."** *He descended into hell: v. 19* **"He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison."**

[A note on this verse, and Christ's descent into hell, just so there's no confusion: When Christ descended into hell and **"made proclamation to the spirits now in prison"** (v. 19) He did so, not as part of His suffering, or to give these condemned souls a second chance, but to proclaim His victory over death and Satan. The Greek word used here literally means to *announce, to publicly proclaim, to make known*. This descent into hell was part of Christ's exaltation. Like a parading, conquering general He was proclaiming His absolute victory over His defeated enemies!]

Going back to the words of the Apostle's Creed and our text, *The third day He rose again from the dead: v. 18* He was **made alive by the Spirit...v. 21** **"through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."** *He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty: v. 22* **"who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him."** Peter connects this saving work of Christ with our baptism, which he says **"now saves you"** (v. 21)!

Elsewhere in the Bible this connection between Christ's work of redemption and our baptism is also clearly made. Think of Paul's words in **Romans** in our first Scripture reading for today: **"Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? ⁴ Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, ⁶ knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin"** (Romans 6:3-6). He also writes in His letter to the **Galatians**, **"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ"** (Galatians 3:27). Should this connection of baptism to the Gospel of Christ's saving work surprise us? No. After all baptism is the Gospel! It is God's Word used according to Christ's command in connection with the water.

It is what we Lutherans call, one of the "Means of Grace." In other words, it is one of the "Ways in which God gives us His grace." Baptism is one of those "ways," the Word and the Lord's Supper are the other two—but the common denominator with all three is the Word of God—the Gospel! Example: Water tower analogy—Think of a water tower that holds the water for a town or city. How does that water get to the citizens? Through pipes that connect to your home and eventually to your faucet where you turn it on and get water. Think of the cross of Christ like a huge water tower or storage tank where all the forgiveness for all the sins of the world for all time was won. That grace of God and His full and free forgiveness is there for all at the cross. How does that grace and forgiveness come to us personally? Through the Word of God, and through the Word of God in connection with Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Think of them like three water pipes coming off of the water tower. They may be three pipes, but they all bring that life-saving, life-giving "water" of the Gospel!

Speaking of water, in our text, Peter uses a very unusual and unique example to illustrate the role of baptism in God's plan of salvation. He writes in **v. 20-21** **"...in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water."** ²¹ **Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."** The very waters that destroyed the whole earth in the great flood recorded in **Genesis** at the same time, in a sense, "saved" Noah and his family by keeping the ark afloat. In the same way the "saving" waters of the flood symbolize, or **"correspond to"** the saving waters of baptism, which **"now saves you"** (**v. 19**). Now, let's make sure that I am not misunderstood: the waters of the flood *symbolize* baptism, the floodwaters themselves actually saved Noah and his family and were not just symbolic. In the same way, baptism does not simply "symbolize" our salvation and forgiveness, but actually gives it to us by connecting us with the death and resurrection of Christ. Not in removing dirt from the body, but from giving us a clean conscience by removing the "dirt" of sin from our souls (**see v. 21**).

Luther spoke of this saving power of baptism in his catechism. In his third part on baptism he asks the question, *How can water do such great things?* The answer:

The water doesn't actually do anything by itself. The power is in God's word, which is in the water, and the faith which trusts this word of God in the water.

Without the word of God it is just plain water and no baptism. With the word of God it really is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and washing of rebirth through the Holy Spirit.

Just as Saint Paul says in the third chapter of Titus:

"According to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying" (Titus 3:5-8).

This all may be fine and true according to the Bible, but what about infants, like Elizabeth? These blessings cannot possibly be given to an infant, can they? What does the Bible say?

- The Bible tells us that we are all born in sin—even at the time of our conception—and are therefore in need of forgiveness, even as infants. King David wrote in **Psalm 51**, **"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me"** (**Psalm 51:5**).
- Jesus Himself gave the command to baptize all nations (**Matthew 28:19**). Infants are included in "all nations" (everyone is! Old people, young people, middle-aged people—everyone!)
- Listen to Peter's words to the thousands who were in the crowd at Pentecost, and listen to how all-inclusive baptism is and the fact that it does, in fact bring us Christ's forgiveness: **"And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."** ³⁹ **For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."**
- Also Jesus specifically invited infants and young children to come to Him, **"Then they also brought infants to Him that He might touch them; but when the disciples saw *it*, they rebuked them."** ¹⁶ **But Jesus called them to *Him* and said, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God'"** (**Luke 18:15-16**).
- Finally, Jesus also tells us that these "little ones" can believe in Him, **"Whoever receives one little child [**Greek**: παιδιον (paidion) a newborn child *infant, babe*; a small or young child (Friberg's Greek Lexicon)] like this in My name receives Me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:5-6).**

Now, this obviously makes no sense whatsoever to our human reason. How saving faith is created in the heart of a young infant like Elizabeth, who can't confess or express her faith, or even understand what we are saying, is a mystery to our minds, but is a comfort to our hearts of faith. This baptism, which we have witnessed this week and today, is nothing short of the miraculous working of God's Holy Spirit.

Let's make sure that we don't go too far, however, and treat baptism like it's some sort of "magic bullet." "Well, my kid's been baptized. Nothing to worry about now. No need to bring them to church or Sunday School or do anything more!" An infant that is born into this world needs to have nourishment and care in order to sustain his or her life and good health. If the infant Elizabeth was born she was left to herself and not nursed and cared for, she would not live very long. In the same way if she is spiritually reborn through baptism here today, and has saving faith created in her heart by the water and Word, but is never again nourished with the life-giving message of the Gospel, her faith will not live very long either. That is why our Lord urges parents to **"bring [their children] up in the training and admonition of the Lord"** (**Ephesians 4:6**). It is also why our Savior's invitation to **"Let the little children come to Me"** is an ongoing invitation, not limited to baptism. Baptism for an infant, like Elizabeth, is the *beginning* of a blessed life of faith.

I remember reading a plaque in one pastor's house that had this question on it, "Have you thought of your baptism today?" The question sort of took me by surprise and made me realize that I hadn't thought of my baptism that day, or in a long while, for that matter. Shouldn't we think about our baptism more often? As the Apostle Peter said in our text, **Baptism Saves You!** That was the day the Lord made us His child and sealed us with His Holy Spirit. We were given the personal assurance of our salvation through the water and the word. We have been baptized into the death and resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ, and have had all our sins washed away. Therefore, we can daily say with the hymn writer:

*God's own child, I gladly say it: I am baptized into Christ!
He because I could not pay it, Gave my full redemption price.
Do I need earth's treasures many?
I have one worth more than any That brought my salvation free
Lasting to eternity! Amen.
(Hymn 751, Worship Supplement 2000)*