



A Sermon on Holy Baptism

Acts 2:38-39

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This morning we celebrated one of the happiest things we do as Christians: Holy Baptism. And yet why is Baptism such a wonderful thing? We know it's wonderful because of what it means, but *what exactly does Baptism mean?* We live in a time when there's a lot of confusion about Baptism. That's not a new thing, although the questions Christians have about Baptism have changed through the centuries. Five hundred years ago the Protestant Reformers fought against a medieval understanding of Baptism that took it as a mechanical rite: the priest used his Holy Spirit given powers to infuse grace into the water, and by applying that water to a person, his or her sin was washed away. Since the grace was thought to be in the water itself, the faith of the person being baptised didn't really matter. The water applied grace to the baptised person unless he or she consciously refused it. The Lord's Supper was seen the same way. As a result a lot of people got the mistaken idea that we are "saved" simply by taking part in the Sacraments. Faith became secondary.

The Reformers affirmed that grace was unquestionably given through the water in Baptism and through the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, but in going back to the teaching of the New Testament and the Church Fathers, they stressed that this grace isn't given mechanically; God offers his grace *through* the elements of water, bread, and wine, but that grace must be received, accepted, and taken *by faith*. In and of themselves, the elements are still just water, bread and wine. Baptism without faith is like throwing water on a corpse; all you're left with is a wet corpse. And the Lord's Supper without faith is simply stuffing so much bread and wine into a dead man. It does nothing.

These are still issues that separate us from our brothers and sisters in the Roman church, but even amongst Protestants we've had our own questions and disagreements. Until about a century ago almost all Protestants, for example, baptised their infants and young children. Today, at least in the Western world, most evangelicals not only do not baptise their children, but also refuse to recognise infant baptism where it is practised. What was, for the first 300 years after the Reformation a radical fringe position on Baptism has, in the last century, become mainstream in our part of the world. The problem is that this view turns the Sacrament upside down. Because it's such a common view, though, it leaves lots of people confused. And so even Christians who belong to traditions like ours, that do what Christians have always done for 2000 years, end up with questions. They don't really understand why we do what we do. We wonder: Who should be baptised? Should children be baptised? And we ask: What does Baptism do? How does it work? Is it just an outward sign? Or is there some spiritual change that takes place in Baptism? It's very seldom that I preach doctrinal sermons, but that's what I want to do this morning as we welcome a new brother into the Kingdom through the waters of Baptism.

To start, let me backup a bit. I've used the word "Sacrament" several times now. Sacrament isn't a word you'll find in the Bible. It's a term that theologians came up with to describe a certain category of rites that we do as Christians, which includes Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Early on, Christians recognised that these two practises have something in common: they're both outward actions we perform as signs and seals of the grace that God gives us inwardly. Tertullian, one of the Church Fathers, came up with the term "Sacrament". He borrowed it from the Roman military. Originally a "sacramentum" was the breastplate of a soldier. When he wore it, it served as a pledge of his loyalty to the army and to the Emperor. Tertullian saw the connection with these outward and visible signs through which God pledges

his grace to us and through which we pledge ourselves to God in faith. It's a good illustration of what Baptism and the Lord's Supper are.

Our Prayer Book defines the Sacraments as "the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace." We can see how this works by looking at each of the Sacraments. Consider that through the Holy Spirit, Jesus gives us new life. And he doesn't just give any old new life; he gives us *his own* life. When he died on the cross for our sake, he offered up his own body and blood. And yet his giving of himself doesn't stop at the cross. Jesus said:

I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (John 6:35)

He also said:

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

Jesus graciously sustains us and empowers us with his *own* life. That's the *inner* grace we receive and celebrate in the Lord's Supper. In the bread and the wine, Jesus offers us *outward* signs and seals of the very real *inner* grace he gives us. And, again, we receive that grace by faith. Without faith the bread and wine are just bread and wine.

You can probably see where this takes us with Baptism. The Lord's Supper signs and seals our continuing life in Jesus Christ. But first we have to appropriate that life for ourselves. It's this being born again that Baptism signs and seals outwardly—our being joined to Jesus and to his Kingdom. The Gospel message is that through the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our sins are forgiven and that through his resurrection from death he has conquered sin and death for us. This is God's gracious offer. All we have to do is take hold of it by faith. When we exercise faith in Jesus, the work that he did at the cross is applied to us—his righteousness is credited to our account. At the same time, not only does he

forgive our sins, he also gives us new life. He takes us—old dead wood—and grafts us into himself—into the living vine. That’s the work of his Spirit, whom he pours into us. Baptism is the outward sign and seal of these inward and spiritual graces. Think of all the imagery that the act of Baptism carries. God has chosen water, the world’s best detergent, as an outward sign and seal of the washing away of our sins. And as that water is poured over us we see the symbolism of the Holy Spirit being poured into us. Today we usually settle for pouring water on the head of a person because of our climate, but if we look at what the Greek word for Baptism means and at the practices of the early Christians, the idea was originally for the person being Baptised to stand in a stream or pool of water—the water surrounding them—as the minister poured water over his or her head three times, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. In addition to the water being poured over their heads, the water all around them symbolised their immersion into the new life that Jesus offers: a washing away of the old and a pouring in of the new.

This is why Baptism is always so closely connected with the Gospel call. At the end of St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus commissioned his disciples, telling them:

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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20)

You can’t make disciples without baptizing them. When St. Peter preached his famous sermon on the day of Pentecost, preaching the Gospel from the Old Testament prophets, the people who were there believed and asked, “What shall we do?” 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. (Acts 2:38)

“Be washed and be filled!” Throughout the book of Acts we see this pattern: the Gospel is preached, people believe and trust Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins, and are then baptised. Over and over we see this. Faith and Baptism are always tied together and cannot be separated. How did Peter make the connection that day? Remember that Peter was a Jew steeped in the Old Covenant. For him, the connection between Baptism and Circumcision was completely natural. Abraham had believed God’s promises—he had faith—but God called him to take hold of those promises through receiving the outward sign of Circumcision. Circumcision was the way—and the *only* way—into the covenant. Now, through Jesus, God was establishing a New Covenant and gave a new outward sign: Baptism. As Circumcision was outward sign by which God had sealed his Old Covenant promises to people, Peter understood that Baptism was the sign by which God would now seal his New Covenant promises. In the book of Colossians St. Paul spells out this connection with Circumcision for those of us who don’t have the Jewish background. In 2:11-13 he tells us:

In [Jesus Christ] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, *having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.* And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.

Paul points to Baptism as a sort of new Circumcision. That doesn’t mean that they’re exactly the same, but it does mean that Circumcision is the foundation on which Baptism rests. If we want to know what Baptism does, we need to start by looking at what Circumcision did, and for that we need to go back to Genesis and to Abraham. We studied this not that long ago. In Genesis 17, God makes a series of

promises to Abraham and says, “This is the covenant I will establish between me and you and your offspring...to be God to you and to your offspring.” But then in the next paragraph God says to him, “This is my covenant, which you shall keep...every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh...and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (Genesis 17:10-11). God established a covenant of promise with Abraham. Abraham took hold of God’s promises—he entered the covenant—by faith and by trusting God to make good on his promises. But God also ordained a covenant sign: Circumcision. It was by receiving the covenant sign that Abraham exercised his faith and was received into that covenant. There was nothing optional about Circumcision. In fact, God said, “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised...shall be cut off...he has broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:14). The Sacrament was the entrance into God’s covenant.

This is what Jesus and the disciples were drawing on when they preached the Gospel and then told the people who heard them that they must believe *and* be baptised. Faith and Sacrament are forever connected and cannot be separated. This why Jesus told Nicodemus in our Baptismal Gospel this morning:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:5)

You can’t separate the outward sign and seal of water from the inward and spiritual grace of the Holy Spirit. In Baptism God offers us forgiveness and new life. By receiving his Baptism we take hold of his promise by faith. Christians have come up with all sorts of other things to substitute for Baptism. We ask people to raise their hands, to sign cards, to walk aisles, and to say prayers—and none of those things is necessarily bad—but none of them is a substitute for the *one* thing that God actually did command: Baptism. Ironically, while many Christians ask people to do all these other things,

Baptism is often made optional. That's not right.

So as Circumcision was the entrance into the Old Covenant, Baptism is the entrance into the New. That means that through our Baptism, God makes his New Covenant a reality in our lives. In his letter to Titus, St. Paul spells it out for us. Look at Titus 3:4-7:

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

There's the Gospel: Our good and loving God sent his Son to save us. We're saved not by any good works we might do; we are saved only on account of his righteousness. What's important here is that Paul says we are saved according to God's mercy, *by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*. The Greek word for "washing" used here is one connected directly with Baptism. Paul refers to Baptism as "the washing of regeneration". And this is exactly what happens when we are baptised: we are regenerated. The early Christians understood this so well that throughout their writings they often simply refer to Baptism as "regeneration". But what is regeneration? It's what happens to us in Baptism, but what is it? This is where a lot of confusion arises.

Over the last two to three centuries our definition of regeneration has evolved. Today, amongst most Protestants, "regeneration" means the same thing as "conversion". If we go back to how the word was used in New Testament times, however, we see that it simply refers to a change of state. In terms of Baptism, it means going from being outside the covenant to being inside the covenant. This is exactly what Circumcision meant in the Old Covenant and this is the first grace given in Baptism: a transfer from

the world, into God's kingdom; a transfer from darkness to light; a being grafted into Jesus, the true vine and source of life. And that leads to the second grace of Baptism that Paul tells us here: the renewal of the Holy Spirit. God's covenant is the place where we receive new life. When we come to him, Jesus pours his Holy Spirit into us—giving us his own life—and it's that new life in the Spirit that does the work of renewing us. Think of dead wood being grafted into a living vine and gradually coming back to life and eventually bearing fruit.

This also clarifies one of the most common misconceptions about Baptism today. It's very common today to hear that Baptism is something *we* do as a sign of *our* faith. There is a very real sense in which Baptism is a sign of our faith. And yet nowhere in the New Testament do we see Baptism presented as a sign of our faith. If this is our primary understanding of what Baptism is—and this is how it's most commonly seen today—we end up standing the Sacrament on its head. First and foremost, Baptism is the sign and seal of the work that God does in us: giving us faith, transferring us into his kingdom, forgiving our sins, and renewing our hearts and minds. Those are all the things that we sinners are completely unable to do on our own. God has to do them for us. And so, yes, we can look back on our Baptism as the time at which we placed our faith in God's Gospel promises, but more importantly, our Baptism is a sign and seal of God's Gospel promises at work in us. Consider that even the faith by which we accept his promise is given to us by God in the first place. Baptism is not our work; it's God's work.

This is why we can take such assurance in our Baptism. In moments of doubt, Martin Luther used to grab his forehead and remind himself: "You are baptised!" He could find assurance in his Baptism because he understood it to be a sign and seal of God's Gospel promises. If we understand Baptism only or primarily as a sign of our own faith, there's not much assurance to be found in it. Our faith is up one day and down

the next. Sometimes we even walk away from God for a time. Our faith is fickle. God's promises are *sure* and stand *forever*. This the power of the Gospel. Jesus did—perfectly, once, and for all—what we can never accomplish and it is this amazing grace he offers us that Baptism signs and seals. Again, Baptism is not our work, it's God's work and in that we can take great comfort and assurance.

Before we close, I want to go back to St. Peter's sermon on Pentecost. We've seen how he drew a connection between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant and between Circumcision and Baptism. This connection is also why Christians have always baptised their infants. We've seen how Baptism is the entrance into the New Covenant and so Peter called the people to repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of their sins. But he goes on. He doesn't just tell *them* to be baptised, he also says:

For the promise is for you and for your children... (Acts 2:39)

That might not mean a lot to us, but consider again that Peter was drawing on his experience of the Old Covenant. In Genesis God commanded Abraham to be circumcised, but he didn't stop there. Adult men entered God's covenant in faith through Circumcision, but God also made a clear command that the *infant* sons of all those who were already circumcised *must also* be circumcised. God's means of ensuring that the children of believers are raised to be believers themselves has always been to give them full inclusion in his Covenant. Peter is drawing on this when he declares the good news that the grace offered by God through Jesus Christ is for "you and for your children and for all who are far off." Peter was saying, "The forgiveness of sins and the baptism in the Holy Spirit is not a one time thing that will be gone tomorrow. God is fulfilling what he declared in the *Old Covenant* and is establishing a *New Covenant* for everyone: for you, for *your children*, and for all peoples." Think about that. In the Old Covenant God *commanded* his people to include their

children as full covenant members. It wasn't optional. The Old Covenant was a beautiful thing in that regard. And yet here we see God establishing a new and *better* covenant. This covenant isn't limited to the Jewish people; it's for the all peoples and nations. In the New Covenant, the covenant sign and seal is no longer offered just to men; men and women, both, are now called to receive the covenant sign. The Old Covenant prepared the way for something even better as God opened his arms wider than he had ever opened them before. Can you see how those first Jewish Christians would never have imagined that God would exclude their children whom he had included since the time of Abraham? How would the covenant be new and better if those men at Pentecost had been told that because God was establishing a New Covenant, they needed to go home and explain to their children that God was now excluding them from his family until such time as they could profess faith themselves and be baptised as adults? There's nothing new and better about that and it runs completely contrary to the spirit of the New Covenant. And so throughout the rest of Acts we see the apostles baptising whole households and would expect, given the makeup of families in those days, that most, if not all, of them included young children and infants.

The practise of baptising only adults who have made a profession of faith arose only after the Reformation in some radical minority groups. They had two arguments for excluding infants from Baptism. First, they argued, since the covenant requires faith, it's wrong to give the covenant sign to infants who are too young to exercise faith. But this argument proves too much. The Old Covenant required faith just as much as the New Covenant does and yet God *commanded* his people in the Old Covenant to include their children by giving them the covenant sign. The faith of the covenant parents was sufficient. The second reason for excluding infants came from a desire for a purified Church. But Jesus warns us against this sort of effort. He said that there will be tares that grow with the wheat and he warned that if we try to

pull up the tares before the harvest, we'll inevitably pull up good wheat with them. The Church has always been a mixed body. Consider that every Jew was circumcised and bore God's covenant sign and was a member of the Old Testament church, but many of them bore that sign without faith. They were tares growing alongside the wheat, and yet it was their membership in that covenant community that gave them the opportunity to receive God's grace, to hear his Word, to experience the discipline of the covenant, and to respond in faith at some point. God calls us to proclaim and teach the Gospel, he even calls us to correct and discipline those in the Church who are not living faithful and Christ-centred lives, but he reserves for *himself* the task of pruning off the dead branches and the sifting of the wheat from the chaff.

Martin Luther used to tell his students to swim in their Baptism. I want to close on that thought. Luther said this because he understood that everything there is to know about what it means to be a Christian is summed up in Baptism and in the liturgy we use to celebrate it. Through the waters of Baptism, God signs and seals us with his grace in Jesus Christ. These waters serve as a symbol to us of the washing away of our sins and the pouring in of the Holy Spirit by Jesus Christ. They symbolise and seal our entrance into the Father's covenant. These are the things that make up our new life. If we would be the people God has made us by faith in his Son, all we need to do is swim in these waters; all we need to do is remember that he has transferred us from darkness into his light and that he has poured his own life into us. So, Brothers and Sisters, go out and swim in your Baptism. Let the life of Christ fill you, let his Holy Spirit renew you, and live your lives as acts of worship and devotion, giving glory to the Father who gave his Son that we might be cleansed from sin and restored to his fellowship.

Let us pray: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for birth from above and for the remission of sins. May almighty God, according to his gracious promise, finish the work of

salvation begun in us, bringing us to the joyful resurrection and to the fulfilment of his eternal kingdom. Amen"