

Lenten Midweek 4 • March 29, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Luther's Small Catechism: The Sacrament of Holy Baptism

Water – chances are you take it for granted. I know that I have – and I try to drink a fair amount of it each day. We drink water, either by itself or with bubbles or sugar or caffeine, etc., but so do our pets, plants, and almost every other living thing. The fact that we're technically in a drought right now should be a call to appreciate the value of water in our lives. If we didn't have water, how would you take a bath or shower, or clean your clothes or wash the dishes? Things would get pretty dirty pretty fast.

Tonight, our midweek Lenten walk through Luther's Small Catechism takes us to the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Baptism gets its name for the ancient Greek work for washing, βαπτίζω. Baptism is washing, cleaning with water. After dinner, you'd "baptize" your dirty dishes. In Holy Baptism, God uses water to wash people – and He does a lot more than just cleaning off some dirt. As we read together from the Small Catechism just a moment ago, Holy Baptism "works the forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare." Baptism is about God giving gifts. If you're looking to find a theme that runs through the Small Catechism, there it is!

Holy Baptism delivers divine gifts. First and foremost, God works through the water and the Word to deliver **faith**, the gift by which you and I are able to receive all the rest of God's gifts. And for those who receive faith by hearing the Good News of Jesus (Rom. 10:17), Baptism gives a strengthening of faith. It restores the part of the human soul that the curse of sin devastated, bringing life to people who were born spiritually dead. Baptism is also a washing – a drowning, really – of the old self who was an enemy of God. God cleanses us from the "dirt" of our sin, even the sinful nature we inherited from our first parents. Washed clean in the water of Baptism, God gives you **forgiveness and freedom**. God uses Baptism to **rescue you from slavery to sin**, from the rule of the devil. **God returns you to the safety and security of soul** that can only come from the restored relationship with Him that He gives.

The Triune God is on mission to restore creation to Himself. Baptism connects you with God. It might not seem like much on the surface, ordinary water connected with God's Word of promise. But that's the thing about the sacraments – the holy things of God: **God seizes the ordinary and uses it for the extraordinary.** God takes water and uses it to deliver His gifts, washing off even the deep-set stain of sin. With the water, God signs your adoption papers to make you His child. In Baptism, through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, **you are given a new identity: you are God's child, forever.**

During the season of Lent, you'll notice that St. John's baptismal font has relocated from its regular place in the front of the sanctuary by the altar and pulpit. Now, it's at the entrance of the nave where we gather to receive God's gifts in worship. It's there as a testimony to the significance of Holy Baptism and its role in bringing people into Christ's Church and the family we are in faith. Entering or leaving the sanctuary, you may dip your finger into the waters of the font and make the sign of the cross on your forehead or on your heart, a physical reminder of the power of Baptism in your own life.

Christian life is baptized life. In our congregation, you'll most often see the rite of Holy Baptism as something that's given for young children, and then, only on occasion. You might not think about it very often. The rite of Confirmation, now a little over a month away for our catechumens, is an affirmation of Baptism. But Baptism plays a key part of each day of the Christian's life, regardless of your age when you were baptized. And because of its divine nature, Holy Baptism is a lasting, permanent gift; it's not something that you'd ever need to have repeated. Even if you stray from life with God and choose paths that would bring harm to your soul, God's promise to you in Baptism is still in effect. He will still be working to call you back to Himself, to rescue you from sin and return you to the joy of His presence.

For the baptized, **every day is a new beginning in God's grace, a new day in Baptism.** Rise daily in your baptism, remembering and delighting that God has declared you to be His own, forgiven and set free. God hasn't left you to work it all out on your own. Let the choices that you make be shaped by your identity as a baptized child of God.

As Lutheran Christians, we celebrate Holy Baptism as God's work to deliver His gifts. So take some time this Lent to stop at the font – and rejoice.

Amen.