

FOCUS: The Good News is through baptism we are made children of God.

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We give a great deal of attention to the birth of Jesus, but it is reported only in two places in the Bible—Matthew and Luke. On the other hand, all four Gospels, plus Acts and Romans, offer us accounts of the baptism of Jesus. Perhaps this should be a sign for us that we should give more attention to this event—and our own baptisms, too—than we do traditionally. In my time here as pastor, I have tried to stress the importance of our baptisms so that we don't lose sight of the real effects baptism has on us as a life-changing event, and not simply something that is “done” to an infant.

We hear John the Baptist declaring that he is offering the people a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But if this is true, why does Jesus come to John in order to be baptized? Jesus has no sins that need to be forgiven. Further, as we confess in our creeds, Jesus was “conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit,” so there is no need for Jesus to be filled with the Holy Spirit descending upon him, right?

So then, if Jesus was sinless and didn't need to repent, and if Jesus was conceived by and already possessed the Holy Spirit, what was the big deal about his being baptized? What makes the baptism of Jesus such a huge thing, theologically speaking, that it is reported six times in the New Testament, and his birth is only reported twice? What have we Christians been missing here?

One explanation for his baptism is a sign of his unity with human beings. Fully human as well as fully divine, Jesus is baptized not because he needs to be baptized, but as a sign of his human nature. Another explanation, and one that makes some sense to me, is that the baptism is a sign of assurance, or reassurance. In Mark and Luke's account, it appears that only Jesus hears the voice from heaven, while in Matthew others hear it and in John the Spirit is a sign to John the Baptist.

Jesus is indeed the Son of God, and he is indeed born of the Holy Spirit, but his baptism gives him—and, given the other accounts, others as well—visual assurance that the Spirit is with him. It was an assurance that undoubtedly would give strength to Jesus during his temptation as well as his time of ministry and most especially during the week of his suffering and death. So, too, do we have the same assurance granted in our own baptisms. We are able to declare, just as Luther declared in the face of doubt or temptation or challenge, “I am baptized!” In baptism, we are made children of God and are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Let me say that again. In baptism, we are made children of God and are filled with the Holy Spirit. That should offer each of us a great deal of comfort and assurance. You see, this is *not* a case of us choosing God or making some sort of personal decision for Christ. No, indeed, dear sisters and brothers, in baptism, God chooses *us*! By the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we come to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and we are led to be baptized or our parents are led to have us baptized.

When Jesus was baptized, Mark tells us, the heavens were “torn apart.” This image of the heavens being ripped open should be familiar to us, because Mark describes the curtain in the temple being “torn apart” at the death of Jesus on the cross. This idea of “tearing apart” is a violent image, and suggests to us that unlike the heavens “opening” or “parting,” as did the Red Sea for Moses and the Hebrews during the exodus, for example, the heavens, like the curtain in the temple, have some degree of permanent damage that cannot be repaired. It says to us that the boundaries between heaven and earth are no longer the same, closed boundaries by which God and creation are separated, but there is now a permanent opening. The separation of God from his creation is gone. Here we have the “bookends” for the public ministry of Jesus—the tearing apart of the heavens when the Spirit descended upon Jesus and the tearing apart of the curtain in the temple when Jesus cried out his last and gave up his spirit.

John’s baptism and Christian baptism are different, and the change comes with the baptism of Jesus. Christian baptism doesn’t simply wash away sins. Christian baptism is not a ritual washing, either. Instead, through Christian baptism, we receive the Holy Spirit and are placed into a very special relationship with God. While John’s baptism was preparatory, it was not a final one-and-for-all-times baptism. However, in Christian baptism, we are changed once and for all time. Once we are chosen by God as His own and are filled with the Holy Spirit, what more do we need? Absolutely nothing.

And what makes baptism with water so special? It’s just water, right? Isn’t baptism simply a symbol or rite of initiation? What’s the big deal, and why do we make such a big deal about it?

These are good questions, dear friends. And, believe it or not, these are questions which I have heard asked by many people—some of them good Lutherans, too! What makes baptism special—or, in church words, a sacrament—is that it has a divine commandment and institution behind it. Scripture is quite clear that we are to “Go and baptize.” Now, the water of baptism looks and feels and even tastes like regular, everyday water, but it is different. It is, as Luther writes in the Large Catechism, “a divine, heavenly, holy, and blessed water—praise it in any other terms you can—all by virtue of the Word, which is a heavenly, holy Word that no one can

sufficiently extol, for it contains and conveys all that is God's."<sup>1</sup> It is, as St. Augustine taught, that when the Word is added to an element or natural substance—like water, bread, and wine—it becomes a sacrament. This is the first thing which we should know about baptism.

The second thing, Luther wrote, that we should know about baptism is the “power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is that it saves.”<sup>2</sup> We are not baptized in order to become a prince, potentate, pastor, president, teacher, doctor, or for any other reason. We are baptized in order that we may be saved. Now, do not think for a moment that baptism is a human work, and that by performing or receiving this deed by human hands we can assume that works, not faith will save us. Rather, baptism is *God's* work. God does all the work in baptism. Pastors and priests and even lay people in emergencies are simply serving as the conduit through which God does this blessed task.

So, dear sisters and brother in Christ, fellow children of God, baptism is not just a rite of passage or some simple act of initiation. It is the single most important thing that happens to us as Christians. In baptism, we are made one with Christ and children of God so that we can inherit with Christ all that God has set aside for His children. Baptism is a permanent act, which is why we need it only once, turning to the sacrament of penance—confession and the comforting word of absolution—to beat back the Old Adam and Old Eve in us that desires for us to sin. Because baptism is such a gift, it is a right and proper thing which we do when we celebrate God's gift to us—His making us His own—with fanfare and joy. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> LC 458:17-18 (Kolb/Wengert)

<sup>2</sup> LC 459:24 (Kolb/Wengert)