

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

If I were to ask you what three word sentence of Martin Luther's has contributed the most to Christian theology, what would you say those three words would be? In fact, it is still to this day for Lutherans within a world both inside Christianity and outside Christianity, the three most important words that perhaps can be uttered that speak to what our faith is about.

I already gave you a kind of clue as to what those three words are because the first preachers of the day, our children, already spoke them to you. The three words are "I am baptized." Those words of Luther were a part of his daily routine. It is told that he would wake up in the morning, he would make a sign of the Cross, and he would say "I am baptized", as a way for preparing for his daily life and ministry.

This sermon's point is that those words "I am baptized", and what happened with Jesus in his baptism, are vitally linked. Now, I'd like you to use your imagination. Many of us were baptized when we were very small children, or infants. Some of us were baptized as older children and adults, but I suspect most of us here who were baptized were baptized at a time when we probably don't remember the preacher's sermon for the day. Well, we're going to remedy that with this particular homily because what we're going to do today is we're going to pretend that today is the day you are being baptized. And this sermon is directed to you, the newly baptized, and what it means that God who came to Jesus at his baptism, comes to us in a very similar way.

One of the things that I will give you as a point of homework is now that you are baptized, I want you to find out your real baptismal date. You can do that, you know. You can discover what church you were baptized in, if you were baptized in a church. You can discover through their records the day you were baptized, and I think it's a good thing to do because in addition to all the other important dates in your life (birthdays, anniversaries, things like that), you can include on that list one now closer to the top: the day that God made you a promise that God would never let you go. With that in mind, here is your baptismal homily.

One of the things we learn about Jesus' baptism in the book of Mark that's different than all of the other Gospels is it has a kind of intense, personal relationship between the Voice that rips Heaven open, and Mark is very intentional with that word that the other gospel writers don't use, that God rips open the Heavens and a Voice comes and descends upon Jesus. Here again, the account of Jesus' baptism:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice from heaven "You are my Son the Beloved. With you, I am well pleased."

Sometimes people ask the question "Why did Jesus have to be baptized if baptism was for the forgiveness of sins?" And as we learned earlier in the account from Mark, that's precisely what John's baptism was about. To help wash up the people. To take the people of Judaism and give them that clean ritual, a new lease on life by this baptism. What happens in Jesus' baptism though, is something different. There is no record of Jesus needing to be washed up, cleaned up, forgiven. But rather, what we learn from the text is it becomes an opportunity for God to re-orient what baptism is and what baptism will forever be after that day. For we learn that baptism is that point at which God seals a promise with the Holy Spirit and makes a declaration. And for Jesus it was the beginning of His ministry.

In His baptism, God validates the adoption process. God declares “this one is my Son”. And forever after, Jesus’ life will be different. Jesus will be the one who has the will of the Father within his very own being and ministry, including his crucifixion and his resurrection. And after Jesus is raised from the dead, the baptism that he received continues to be lived out. For once Jesus is raised from the dead, he is always Jesus baptized, always Jesus crucified, always Jesus raised.

And because Jesus’ baptism is forever linked to the church and your baptism, that means this Jesus who is always baptized, is always baptized in people. You are the Body of Christ. You who this day are baptized are the ones to whom God’s promise now resides so that the ministry of Jesus continues to be lived out in your daily lives.

Now I want you to consider what this means: this personal, intimate relationship that God has with Jesus and now God has with you today in your baptism. Jesus was claimed and adopted by God and so too today you are claimed and adopted by God. You are baptized.

I started this homily by telling you these three words “I am baptized” are perhaps the most important words that Lutheran theology can offer to both the world and the church and it’s true for this reason: often times when people in the world and in the church think about their relationship with God, they think of it as a choice, as something that unless you choose it, it isn’t really valid. I can’t tell you how many times people have asked me about my baptism and I say “Yes, I’m baptized”. “Yes, but have you accepted Jesus?” And I say “I am baptized”. “Yes, but do you really feel it?” “I am baptized”.

You see, the emphasis is never on our acceptance, our ability, our reaching up to God. It’s always our willingness to say “God has chosen us.” God has chosen you. God has chosen me.

The implications of that change the world. No longer do we have to worry if we’re worthy or not. For so many people I know who are not a part of the church, they understand their relationship to God as being something they can’t have because they’re not worthy to accept God. Or they would rather trust in their own merits. But, we are baptized. Which means it is something that has taken place outside of us, for us, so that we might be able to be in mission for the Body of Christ.

This is something that we believe and teach and we should never lose. And I fear that often times we miss the mark by missing this message. That we think there’s something else that must happen beside this baptism. And today I’m here to tell you the Good News. You are baptized. Not only is it sufficient, it is God’s promise that God will never let you go.

Of course the “so what?” is the important part of what’s next. After you’re baptized, who are you and what do you do? And for the next several Sundays throughout this Epiphany season, you will receive your mission statements. You will receive your marching orders. You will hear stories about Jesus, His miracles, His teachings and what happened with Jesus is what will happen with you. Today however, I want you to bask in the glow of the light of Christ that comes to you to make sure that no matter what, when you leave this place today you know that you are claimed by God and that is sufficient. That is enough. That is everything.

Sixty years ago, February 20, 1955, I was baptized at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Youngstown, OH, a church founded in 1812. They celebrated their 200th anniversary a few years’ ago and I can tell you growing up in that congregation, under the watchful eye of Sunday School teachers, of choir directors and organists, of family and friends within that congregation, I can tell you that being nurtured in my

baptism was the highest priority for that community. To make Christ known to the baptized. Ten years after my baptism there was a dedication of a new church building because the little white framed church at the corner of Midlothian and South Avenue no longer could hold the population of people. It was greatly in need of a kind of revival in building and in style. And in 1965 a brand new building was built with a brand new pipe organ and the few hundred people that gathered on that summer day, I can remember like it was yesterday, as we the children's choir and the adult choir sang "Surely the Lord is in this Place". And it was so. We were the baptized. We were living our calling in that neighborhood to be God's people.

Fast forward 50 years, I received an email from a member of the congregation of Bethlehem Lutheran Church who is about to be 95 on his next birthday, and George said to me: "I thought you would want to know that on the 28th of December, the day we were here celebrating Holy Innocents and Martyrs, on the 28th of December, Bethlehem Lutheran Church held its last worship service and closed its doors.

Now, I've been a part of the church for now a long time and know the heartache of congregations that have to close. In fact, its been a part of this synod's ministry all too often, congregations that shrivel and die. But I never thought it would happen with Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Youngstown OH, a vibrant place of mission and ministry where it was just yesterday we were singing 'Surely the Lord is in this Place'. And yet they, like so many other places, no longer meet to worship at that site.

I share this with you because in the context of what it means to be baptized, means that we must always keep before us that we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus and it may be our own personal death and resurrection. As you know, in this community of faith, we like every other community of faith, must come to grips with the reality of sin, death and the devil and however its manifested, and that second one, that thing called death, it always threatens to undo us. To take us away from our mission, to threaten us with the thought that maybe our baptism doesn't matter. Oh, I mourn the passing of so many over the years of being a pastor in this place and other places. I mourn the passing of a colleague and friend who at age 61 didn't come home from a business trip this past week. I mourn the passing of one of the leading lights of our congregation, Charles Martin, whose wit, wisdom, charm and orneriness were a beacon of life and faith for so many in this place and in this surrounding community. And now, even an institution, a congregation falls victim to that which we cannot avoid. But yet, the promise continues to live. For out of death we believe, comes new life. Out of drowning in our baptism with the crucified Savior we are reborn children of God with a mission. You saw it on the sign when you came in. Making Christ Known. And by the very fact that you are baptized today, you are a part of the Body of Christ in that mission. We take not for granted the mission that's been given to us. We learn the lessons of those whose death becomes for us a grieving moment and we press forward to run the race that is before us. But for today my friends, today you are baptized.

Do you every have a hard time believing? Honestly, do you ever sometimes have a hard time believing the whole part of this stuff called faith? If you do, you're in good company. In fact, if it were up to our belief we would never make it because sometimes we're up on the highest mountain, and it doesn't take long sometimes to feel like we're down in the very depths. Sometimes we're at the top of our faith-game. Where we feel like there's nothing can stop us now, and then the rug gets pulled out from under us and this thing called belief, our own trust, doesn't work anymore. But friends I will tell you this: where belief runs hot and cold, you are baptized! You are given a promise from God that God will never let you go. God will never weary from forgiving you. God will never put you into a place where He

doesn't love you. And that's what makes all the difference in the world with our message to a world and to other Christians who may think it different.

So today I close this sermon with a word from God. I dare speak to you a word from God. I don't do it without some fear and trembling, but I believe it to be the truth of what the baptism of our Lord for you and me means today. When Jesus was baptized God's voice split the heavens and said "This is my Son my Beloved with whom I am well pleased." Today I want you to fill in the blanks, today the day of your baptism and I want you to put your name in this blank as you hear God's word directed to you today. YOU (fill in the blank) are my beloved daughter. YOU (fill in the blank) are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased.

You are baptized.

Amen.

Pastor William H. Diem