

“BAPTISM SAVES YOU”

1 Peter 3:13-22

Sixth Sunday of Easter (Series A)

May 21, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The sermon this morning is based on the epistle lesson. It comes from *The First Letter of Peter*, chapter 3, verses 13 through 22. It is on page 858 of the pew Bible.

This is one of those passages that has way more information than we could possibly cover in a twenty minute sermon. So I’m going to focus in on the last half of it. But that doesn’t mean the other parts are less important. So instead of writing a two hour sermon, I decided I would just briefly mention the other topics so you can at least be aware of them.

We learn in this passage the value of suffering for righteousness’ sake. We also learn the importance of apologetics—that is, knowing how to give a defense for our hope with gentleness and respect. We also learn about Christ’s descent into hell. If you have ever wondered, as we confess the Apostles’ Creed together, where that is in the Bible, this is it. Peter doesn’t say much about it, other than the fact that it happened, so the creed doesn’t say much about it either, other than the fact that it happened.

So those are the topics we won’t actually be able to cover. If you want to talk about them, grab me after church or stop by the office sometime this week.

So please stand as you are able for the epistle lesson. From 1 Peter 3, we begin reading at verse 13.

¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.” ¹⁵ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the spirit, ¹⁹ through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ²⁰ who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Baptism saves you. That’s what the Scripture plainly says. Baptism saves you.

But this truth is not universally accepted, is it—not even among Christians? We look at baptism and think, *Really? It looks so ordinary and mundane.* Baptism seems like such an

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outward thing, while faith—that’s an inward thing. We tend to think of our religious life as strictly personal and inward. We think of it as purely spiritual, and we take *spiritual* to mean, “Not physical,” even though that’s not what *spiritual* means.

So we have a hard time fitting baptism into this, because baptism is obviously outward and physical. All we see is something happening to the outside of the body. So baptism seems too ritualistic or sacramental to actually do anything spiritual. So what do we do with this passage that so clearly says, “Baptism now saves you” (3:21)?

Well, first of all, we believe it to be true. Sometimes when we have trouble understanding what a Scripture passage means, the best place to start is to simply say, *It means what it says*. Instead of looking for some way to explain it away, we take it on face value, and try to understand it that way. So we believe the Scripture is true when it says, “Baptism now saves you.” And we believe that means exactly what it says. Baptism saves you.

During confirmation class I like to have a little fun with stuff like this. We’ll read the verse that says, “Baptism now saves you,” and then I’ll ask a question like, “Does that mean baptism *really* saves you?” And sometimes—not always, but sometimes—I can trick the students into saying, “No.” And I don’t know why—maybe I’m just twisted—but I think this trickery is kind of fun. But I don’t really want to deceive our young people, so then I ask, “Well, what does the Bible say?” And they say, “Well, it says here that baptism saves us.” And then I ask again, “Does that mean that baptism *really* saves you?” And now they say, “Yeah, I guess it does.” And then we go on to talk more about what that means and how it works.

So, yes, we really do believe that baptism really does save us. This can be a hard truth to hang on to, because it just seems so ordinary and unspiritual, but in the Lutheran Church, at least, we’re hanging on to it, because this is what the Scripture teaches.

So how does the Scripture explain this difficult statement? Peter compares baptism to the flood, when eight people—Noah being the most famous of them—were saved through water.

Let me pose a Bible history question to you. I would call it *trivia*, but there’s nothing trivial about it. Here it is: During the flood, what did God save Noah and his seven companions from? What did God save these eight people from?

Now, we might be tempted to answer, “The flood.” After all, the flood was a catastrophic destruction, and most of the world’s population died in it. So we might be tempted to say, *God saved them from the flood*. But we would be wrong. God is the one who sent the flood. Certainly, God spared them from his wrath, but it’s not quite right to say that God saved them from himself.

So what did God save them from? In Genesis 6—right before God told Noah to build an ark—God saw how wicked and evil man had become (Gen. 6:5). “The earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence” (Gen. 6:11). That’s why God sent the flood.

So what did God save these eight people from? He saved them from the wickedness, the evil, the corruption, and the violence that had filled the earth. The flood wasn’t the problem. The flood wasn’t the thing these eight people needed to be saved from. The problem was the wickedness of man. The flood was actually good. The flood was God’s solution to the problem. And the flood, ultimately, was God’s means of saving Noah and his family from corruption. To the wicked men who were drowned, the flood was God’s righteous judgment. But to Noah and

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his family, the flood was their salvation. And we see in this the typical pattern of God’s salvation. God typically saves his people by destroying something or someone else. More on that later.

So during the flood, God saved these eight people from the wickedness that filled the earth. And the tool—or instrument—God used to save them was the flood.

This is what Peter teaches in our epistle lesson. Now, some English translations do a better job with this than others. The pew Bible (NIV, 1984) does a pretty good job with it. So if your version confuses you, just look at the pew Bible. And if you’re curious about the reason for the differences, ask me about it later, and I’d be happy to explain it.

So Peter says these eight people “were saved through water” (3:20). That is, the flood is the instrument God used to save them. And then Peter compares this to baptism. Baptism does the exact same thing. It drowns wickedness. But it’s not someone else’s wickedness that gets drowned in your baptism; it’s your own wickedness that is drowned. It is your own sin that God drowns in the waters of baptism. And this is how baptism saves you.

It’s not just an outward thing. Peter says it’s “not the removal of dirt from the body” (3:21). It’s something else. It is “the pledge [or, *promise*] of a good conscience toward God” (3:21). And, again, here, some English translations do a better job with this than others. And, again, the pew Bible does a really good job with it, so if your version confuses you, just look at the pew Bible. And if you’re curious, I would really enjoy explaining the reason for the differences.

So baptism is the pledge—or *promise*—of a good conscience toward God. Now this is not a promise that we make to God. And this is not a pledge our good consciences make to God. This is God’s promise to us that he has given us a good conscience toward him. The promise is that despite all our sins, God has drowned those sins in the waters of baptism and we now stand before him with a good conscience. This is God’s gift to us. This is why we can say, “Baptism now saves you.”

If baptism saves because it is a promise we make to God, then salvation would depend on what we do. That would be salvation by our own works. And that’s just plain wrong. But if baptism saves because it is God’s promise to us, then everything depends on what God does, and our salvation is secure. And that’s just plain right.

And herein lies the key difference between our teaching on baptism and those who reject the biblical teaching that baptism saves: baptism is not something we do for God; baptism is something God does for us. Okay? Baptism is *God’s* work.

If baptism is our act of obedience to God’s command, then, yeah, we would have a real problem saying that baptism saves. But baptism is not our act of obedience. It is not our work. The Scriptures never speak of it that way. It is God’s work, whereby he drowns our sins and regenerates our hearts (Titus 3:5). So saying that baptism saves is not a problem at all, because baptism is God’s work. And if baptism is God’s work, then everything is pure grace.

So we call baptism a “means of grace.” That is, it is one of God’s instruments—or *tools*—for bestowing his grace.

The best way I can describe this is by comparing it to a carpenter and his tools. A carpenter might build something like a playhouse. And he uses tools to do it. So you might look at a hammer and ask him, “What does that do?” And he says, “It pounds nails.” So then do you picture in your mind a hammer floating in mid-air and then striking a nail? No; that would be

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silly. There has to be a hammer swinger—also called a “carpenter”—swinging the hammer. But that doesn’t mean the carpenter was wrong when he said the hammer pounds nails. Of course it pounds nails. It just has to be connected to the carpenter. Otherwise it doesn’t do anything.

And baptism works the same way. Baptism is God’s tool. So the catechism teaches us, “Baptism is not simply water, but it is the water used according to God’s command and connected with God’s Word.” We never think of baptism by itself—like some magical floating hammer. It’s always connected to God. God is the one working in baptism. And if God is behind it all, then “Baptism works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe, as the word and promise of God declare.” It’s not some magical, “hocus-pocus” thing. It is God’s tool to deliver salvation to us. God uses it to forgive sins.

So we just see water. That’s all we see. But God has promised us that the water is his tool to connect us to something else. The water connects us to Jesus Christ. And it connects us to Jesus Christ at two specific moments in history—two historical events we are connected to. And it is so important to be connected to both of them. The two events are Jesus’ crucifixion and Jesus’ resurrection. Now, without these two historical events, baptism does nothing. Baptism would not save us without these two events. In fact, without these two events, nothing could ever save us. But these two events did happen. Jesus Christ suffered for righteousness’ sake. “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the spirit.” (3:18) This is what God did to save us.

We said before that God typically saves his people by destroying something or someone else. This is simply because we have enemies. God is a savior. He is a deliverer. He is a rescuer. When someone is held captive by their enemies, you save them by defeating their enemies. This is why God typically saves his people by destroying something or someone else. God destroys his people’s enemies.

In the flood God saved Noah and his family by destroying the rest of the wicked people on earth. Because of their corruption, they were enemies to these few faithful people. This was a case of God destroying many, just to save a few. But it wasn’t a complete salvation. These eight people were not completely saved from corruption, because the corruption was in them as well. Read the history of God’s people after the flood—even that first generation that stepped out of the ark—they weren’t so good. The flood was merely a partial salvation. And this partial salvation was good, but it wasn’t the ultimate solution. It wasn’t the complete salvation God had in mind from the foundation of the world.

The complete salvation comes in Jesus Christ. Instead of destroying the many, just to kind of save a few, God would destroy the One, in order to completely save the many. This is what God did in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was destroyed in order to save us.

We might wonder sometimes why it was necessary for Jesus to die in order to save us. The answer is that he was destroyed because we have enemies. Our three enemies are sin, death, and the devil. If we only had one enemy—if the devil were our only enemy—I suppose God could have just killed him and been done with it. But he is not our only enemy. We name sin first, and then the consequence of sin—death. These are also our enemies. And these enemies are not outside of us. They are inside us. Sin is our fallen nature, and death is a process that

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begins in us from the very moment of conception. If Jesus is going to destroy these enemies, he must take our sin from us into his own body and suffer the death for us.

So Jesus suffered for sin, once and for all, and he rose victoriously over death. Jesus defeated these enemies in his body, and baptism is the tool God uses to connect us to this body of our Savior. Just like a hammer puts a nail in a board. God uses baptism to put you in Jesus.

The Scripture teaches that “We were ... buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Rom. 6:5). Baptism literally connects us to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, so that his death becomes the death of our sin and his resurrection becomes the source of our new life, both now and into eternity. This is how baptism saves. It’s not just an outward ritual. It saves because it literally connects us to Jesus. All we see is water. But when this water is connected to the promise of God in baptism, it is so much more. It is Jesus’ literal death and resurrection. To say, “Baptism saves you,” is simply to say, “Jesus death and resurrection save you,” because that’s what baptism is.

So Peter says, quite plainly, “It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (3:21). You are baptized into your living Savior. So hear and believe the plain words of Scripture: “Baptism saves you.” Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.