

# BAPTISM GIVES LIFE

John 3:1-8

Third Wednesday in Lent

March 3, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 3, verses 1 through 8. Like last Wednesday, this is one of several passages we will consider. But this one, in particular, identifies Baptism as the source of new life. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 3, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

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

You may be seated.

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

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Dear saints,

You have a great treasure in your Baptism. Baptism saves you. It forgives your sins. It gives the Holy Spirit. It drowns your sinful flesh. By it you are born again as a child of God. It unites you with Jesus Christ. It unites you with one another. And it guarantees that you will be raised with Christ on the Last Day.

Last Wednesday we studied some of the Scripture passages that teach the first three of these: Baptism saves you. It forgives your sins. And it gives you the Holy Spirit. And the central concept was that it forgives sins. Because it forgives sins, it also saves us from death. And because it forgives sins, we are prepared to receive the Holy Spirit.

Tonight we will consider some of the passages that teach the rest of the list: It drowns your sinful flesh. By it you are born again as a child of God. It unites you with Jesus Christ. It unites you with one another. And it guarantees that you will be raised with Christ on the Last Day. And we can summarize all these in the short statement, "Baptism gives life."

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In 1529, when Martin Luther published both his small and large catechisms, objections to the biblical and historical teaching on Baptism were just beginning to arise. For most of the Church's history, there was little or no objection. But as Luther found some success in objecting to the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church, it opened the door for other more radical reformers (e.g., Ulrich Zwingli, the Anabaptists) to object to all sorts of things, including the biblical and historical teaching on Baptism. They tried to throw the baby out with the Baptism water. So Luther defended Baptism from these objections in his catechisms.

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The basic objection at the time, and this continues to be the objection today, is that water is just too simple. They argued that a physical element like water can't really have spiritual benefits. So in the Small Catechism, after listing the benefits of Baptism, Luther asks, "How can water do such great things?" Answer: "It is not the water, indeed, that does such great things, but the Word of God, connected with the water, and our faith which relies on that Word of God."

The power is in the Word of God. Luther also speaks of our faith, which relies on that Word of God. He does not, however, mean that our faith makes the Sacrament valid or effective. It is only the Word of God that does that. In the Large Catechism, Luther says, "My faith does not make Baptism, but receives it." By the way, I highly recommend that you read the Large Catechism. After you've begun to study and memorize the Small Catechism, read the Large Catechism. Despite its name, it's not really very large. It's just large in comparison to the Small Catechism. Anyway, Luther teaches that Baptism is valid, regardless of what we think it is, and even regardless of whether or not we believe in Christ, although an unbeliever would not receive the benefits, because the benefits are received by faith.

Suppose, hypothetically, that an unbeliever came in, pretending to believe in Christ, and asked for Baptism. We would baptize them, not knowing their duplicity. And the Baptism would be valid, but they would not actually receive any of the benefits. Their sins would not be forgiven. They would not be saved. And they would not receive the Holy Spirit. But the reason is not that there was anything wrong with the Baptism. The reason is that the person does not believe. So if that person later repents, that is, they feel contrition over their sins and they trust in Christ, we would not rebaptize them. Their first Baptism is still valid, and now that they have faith, they would receive the benefits of that Baptism. Luther says in the Small Catechism, "Our faith . . . relies on that Word of God." Faith merely receives the gift; the power is in the Word of God.

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Last week for the Old Testament lesson, we read about Naaman (*2 Kings 5:9-14*). He was a foreign general from Syria who had leprosy. He came to Israel because he heard there was a prophet, Elisha, who could heal him. And Elisha told him to go and wash seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman was a bit put off because there were better rivers back in Syria. But his servants prevailed upon him to trust the word of Elisha, so Naaman washed in the Jordan, and his skin was cleansed. But suppose things went differently. What if Naaman had gone back to Syria and washed in one of the better rivers there? Would he have been cleansed? No. And what if Elisha had not commanded him to wash in the Jordan River, but Naaman had the idea himself? Would he have been cleansed? No. And what if some other person simply heard about Naaman being healed and decided to go wash in the Jordan River? Would that person have been cleansed? Again, no. And why not? Because there was no command or promise connected with any of that. The power was not really in the Jordan River, but in the Word of God. Elisha, the prophet of God, spoke a specific promise. It was for Naaman. It required the Jordan River. And it promised healing from leprosy. When the promise of God was attached to the water, it became a healing water for the recipient of the promise. The Word of God made the Jordan River a healing water for Naaman.

The same is true for Baptism. There's nothing special about the water. I'll let you in on a secret: it's just tap water. It comes from the sink in the kitchen. The only thing different about it is that it's slightly warm so the babies don't scream. There's nothing special about the water. But when the Word of God is added to it, it becomes a Baptism. And that is why it saves. The Word of God makes certain promises concerning Baptism. If the Word of God did not promise those

things, the water would have no power. But when the Word of God promises those things, it becomes a divine Baptism. The power is in the Word of God.

That means that Baptism is really God's work. Many of our protestant friends object and say, "Baptism can't save because it's man's work, and we are not saved by our works." Their assertion that Baptism is man's work does not come from Scripture, but from their own denial of Baptism. Since they reject the power of Baptism, they conceive it to be an outward sign of an inward commitment. In this way, they think Baptism is our work. But Scripture never speaks of Baptism that way. Baptism is not our work, it is God's work. When Naaman washed in the Jordan River, he was not cleansed by his own work. He was cleansed by the power of the Word of God.

This, I think, is where a lot of people get hung up. When they've been trained to see Baptism as a work, they read the passages about Baptism and think, "It just can't mean that. It can't actually save. It can't actually forgive sins, because it's man's work, and we can't be saved by our works." But just switch this little thing around, and see if that changes things: Baptism is not our work; it is God's work.

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One of the other objections is that Baptism is contrary to faith. This is fueled by the "once baptized, always saved" idea. I don't know if I've ever heard someone state it so crassly, but liberal Lutherans have at least given the impression that if a person was baptized, then they must be saved, even if there was no indication in word or deed that they actually believed in Christ during their life. But this is a complete misunderstanding of Baptism. Baptism is not an irrevocable ticket to heaven. It's not like you get to heaven, pull out your Baptism card, and say, "Here, my parents got this for me when I was a baby."

Instead of seeing Baptism as a one-time thing, we should really see it as the beginning of the life of faith. This is what Jesus teaches Nicodemus in John 3. He says, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (3:5). By "water and the Spirit," Jesus is referring to Baptism. Baptism is the new birth.

You might be able to guess, if you didn't know this already, that many of our Christian friends deny that Jesus is speaking of Baptism here. And they're kind of cornered into saying that, because if they grant that "water and the spirit" is a reference to Baptism, it really seals the deal. There have been some rather silly arguments, but I want to be as fair as possible, so I'll let the silliest ones go and deal with the argument that seems to be the strongest. They argue that Jesus is not talking about Baptism here, because Nicodemus would not have understood "water and the Spirit" to be a reference to Baptism (D.A. Carson). This is the most academically credible objection, but it still doesn't hold up. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and we know that the Pharisees were very familiar with John the Baptist. John baptized, mostly at the Jordan River, which was only about fifteen miles from Jerusalem. And we know that people from Jerusalem and all over Judea were going out to him to be baptized (Matt. 3:5). Even many of the Pharisees and Sadducees went out to John's Baptism, which didn't go very well (Matt. 3:7), but they heard John speak of someone coming after him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; John 1:33). So not only were the Pharisees familiar with John's practice of baptizing. They were also familiar with his teaching that the Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit. So when Nicodemus hears Jesus speak of "water and the Spirit," it's really hard to imagine how he could understand that to be a reference to anything other than Baptism.

And then, if you read on a little bit farther, you will see that after this conversation with Nicodemus, the next thing Jesus does is baptize a bunch of people. So Baptism is very much in

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the historical context surrounding Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. We also see here that Jesus' Baptism did not replace water with the Holy Spirit, but Jesus would add the Holy Spirit to Baptism.

We also see in chapter 4(1-2), and this is kind of interesting, that when it says that Jesus was baptizing, it wasn't actually Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. That means that when Jesus' servants baptize in his name, that is the Baptism of Jesus. And you can apply this to your own Baptism. When some person baptized you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, that was not some person's baptism. That was Jesus' Baptism. You can rightly say that Jesus baptized you. He does it through his servants.

Okay, let's go back to the thing about being born again. That's what we came to John 3 to do anyway. We just needed to establish that, yes, Jesus is speaking of Baptism when he speaks of being born again. To be baptized is to be born again. And this imagery shows what Baptism means for the rest of our lives.

It does not mean that you get a special Baptism card that you put in your back pocket until the Judgment Day. The new birth is the start of a new life. When a child is born—and I'm talking about natural birth here—there is a new life. And by virtue of being born, that child is in a relationship with its parents. Baptism does the same thing. It creates for you a new life as a child of God. Regarding natural birth, no one decides to be born. Parents do the work of creating the child. And with the spiritual birth, God does the work. No one decides to be born again. It is never man's work. But God brings it about through Baptism.

Birth brings about new life. But just because a child is born, does not mean that child will continue to live. That's why parents take classes on how to care for a baby. That child needs food and shelter as basic physical necessities. It also needs interaction and instruction as it grows up. In these and many different ways, parents love their children. The child needs this care from its parents so it can grow up into a strong and mature person. If parents neglect to give a child these things, it will be immature or weak, and it may even die. So birth may be the beginning of life, but it does not guarantee the rest of the life.

The same is true for the new birth. Baptism may be the beginning of spiritual life. But it does not guarantee that life will remain. In our Baptism liturgy, we are always reminded that a child must be "taught the Word of God, upheld by prayer, and given a Christian example to follow" (*Ministerial Acts*, 22). What happens if a child is baptized, but never taught the Word of God? That faith will die. What happens if that child grows up and says, "I don't need repentance. I enjoy my sin"? That's like a hunger strike. The life given in Baptism will die.

So when we say that Baptism saves, that does not, in any way, exclude faith. Rather, Baptism is the beginning of faith. It is the new birth. And that means that we should continually grow in faith and in the Word of God. The baptized Christian lives and grows by receiving the Word of God.

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The baptized Christian also lives in daily repentance. This is what Luther teaches in the fourth question. Baptism "signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should daily come forth and rise to live before God in righteousness and holiness forever." Then he quotes Romans 6. There Paul asks if we should just continue sinning so that God can be even more gracious to us. The obvious answer is, "No," but the reason might surprise us. The reason Paul gives is Baptism. It's not, "If you keep sinning willfully, God will revoke your forgiveness." That may be true, but that's not how Paul answers. His answer is Baptism. "Do you

not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Rom. 6:3-5). Baptism drowns the sinful flesh by joining us to Jesus’ crucifixion. And if we have been joined to Jesus in his crucifixion, we are also joined to him in his resurrection. That means that we are raised now with his righteousness. Our sinful flesh still clings to us, but the new man has also been raised in the power of Jesus’ resurrection. So we must fight the old Adam. That means daily repentance, confessing our sins and trusting in Jesus for forgiveness. As new creatures, we are to live in Jesus’ righteousness. We are not to continue in sin, because that’s not who we are anymore. By Baptism, God has made us to be something new.

Baptism does this by joining us with Christ in his death and resurrection. None of this works without Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. The cross of Jesus is the engine that gives Baptism its power. And the Word of God connects the cross to the water. So when Baptism connects us to Jesus’ death and resurrection, it drowns the sinful flesh, it gives us new life, and it guarantees that we will be raised like Christ on the Last Day.

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The Old Testament picture of this is Israel crossing the Red Sea (Ex. 14:19-31). Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2. He says, “For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” As Israel fled from slavery in Egypt, God led them to the Red Sea, where they seemed to be trapped between the sea and the Egyptian army. But the sea was really God’s means of deliverance. He opened the sea, the people passed through the sea, and then God closed the sea after them, drowning the Egyptian army. This foreshadowed of Baptism. Before crossing the sea, the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. But when they passed through the sea, God used it to drown their oppressors, and they emerged as a new and free nation on the other side. This foreshadowed Baptism, where God drowns the sinful flesh that held us captive, so that we might emerge free on the other side, belonging only to Christ.

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Here’s one last quick one. This will round out the benefits of Baptism: since Baptism unites us with Jesus Christ, it also unites us with one another. Paul teaches this in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” So Baptism, in addition to uniting us with Christ, also unites us with one another.

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These are the benefits of Baptism. God reveals these benefits to us in his Word, so that we will rejoice in his salvation and have confidence in Christ. By attaching these benefits to Baptism, God makes it so that we don’t have to look to ourselves for our assurance of salvation. We do not have to look inward at our own faith. When we do that, we wonder, *Do I have enough faith? Have I been sincere enough in my repentance?* No. God would have us look outside of ourselves. We look to Christ, who was crucified and raised for our salvation. This happened outside of us. And we remember our Baptisms, where we were joined to Christ in his death and resurrection. So instead of looking inward, where we find sin, and guilt, and shame, we look to Christ, and we say, “I am baptized into Christ.”

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You have a great treasure in your Baptism. Baptism saves you. It forgives your sins. It gives the Holy Spirit. It drowns your sinful flesh. By it you are born again as a child of God. It unites you with Jesus Christ. It unites you with one another. And it guarantees that you will be raised with Christ on the Last Day. All of these benefits flow from the cross, and the Word of God attaches them to your Baptism. Amen.

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