

Sermon for January 7, 2018 – Jesus’ Baptism

Acts 2:38-29 (EHV)

Theme: The Sacrament of Baptism:

- 1) What it is.
- 2) What it offers.
- 3) Who it’s for.

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far away, as many as the Lord our God will call.” (EHV)

Have you ever heard about the fountain of youth? The ancient historian Herodotus speaks of a lost spring in Ethiopia - the waters of which allowed the inhabitants of that land – the Macrobianians - to live exceptionally long lives.

Could you imagine if such a spring actually existed – the waters of which allowed people to cheat death, if only temporarily? People would go crazy – doing and spending all they could to get access to that water.

But it’s only a legend, right?

Actually, there is a water that does far more than the mythological spring in Ethiopia. Bathing in that water only prolonged life for a while. This water gives eternal life.

And where do we find this wonderful fountain of youth? God has given it to his Church in the sacrament of Baptism.

With St. Peter’s exhortation at Pentecost as our guide, let us meditate on **the Sacrament of Baptism:** 1) What it is, 2) What it offers, and 3) Who it’s for.

Part One: What the Sacrament of Baptism is.

The words Peter spoke to the crowd gathered at Pentecost is really God’s message to everyone in this fallen world: *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

Notice that the LORD closely ties baptism together with repentance - which automatically leads us to ask the questions: what exactly is repentance and Baptism?

When we hear the word “repentance” we automatically think of being sorry for our sins. A person can use the word in that way, but the biblical word translated as repent literally means “to turn” or

“change one’s mind.” Repentance, therefore, means much more than just being sorry for our sins; it means having a change of heart – being sorry for having offended God and trusting in his mercy to forgive. Repentance is a spiritual U-turn. It is a God-given change of heart that leads to changed behavior based on a God-given fear, love and trust in the LORD that the Holy Spirit instilled in us through the Gospel.

Did you notice how many times I mentioned “God-given” in my definition of repentance? That’s because, without the Holy Spirit working in our hearts through his Word, there can be no change. We would remain our same old sinful selves – loving sin instead of the LORD.

But God worked that change in our hearts through the preaching of his Word. He gives us a new, spiritual birth through the sacrament of Baptism – which leads us to our second question: what, exactly, is baptism? In and of itself, the word means to purify or wash – and was often used by the Jews to describe the ceremonial cleansing of all sorts of items: bowls, pitchers, dining couches . . . you name it.

The LORD, however, took this word and applied it to something new: the spiritual cleansing of a person, through which all sin would be washed away. The water used in Baptism is just plain water, which (in and of itself) possesses no special properties that could actually wash a human soul clean from sin. God’s Word, however, does have such properties. As the account of creation illustrates, when the LORD speaks, things happen. Therefore, just as dish soap mixed with water is able to cut through the grease that water cannot do on its own, so also God’s Word in and with the waters of Baptism cuts through the greasy sin that stains our soul – lifting it off our hearts and carrying it away.

Understand, then, that Baptism is not merely some cute Church rite for babies. No, it is a powerful sacred act - instituted by God himself and used in connection with his powerful word - whereby the LORD initiates and completes a spiritual change in our hearts - washing away our sins, and creating a new spiritual life in us, as our sermon text indications:

Part Two: What the Sacrament of Baptism offers.

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Do you understand how wonderful the promise is that God is making in this verse? Let me try to explain it by means of an illustration: imagine being diagnosed with rapidly spreading cancer, for which there is no cure. You are given only weeks to live.

But then someone tells you a secret: they have found the lost fountain of life used by the ancient Macrobian in Ethiopia and have brought some of its water for you to bath in. This water is certainly more costly than you could ever afford, and yet the benefactor offers it to you for free. So, what do you do? You wash yourself in that water and go to the doctor to have yourself tested again. And what do the tests reveal? All your cancer is gone. And since that cancer is gone you will not die, but live.

Oh, how such water would change a person! How much more baptism changes us! You see, through that blessed bath, the LORD removes from us something far worse than cancer: he removes all our sins. And because the LORD washed away all our sins, the threat of eternal death has also been removed. We have been given a new life. More than that, we have been given the Holy Spirit himself – who makes us God’s dearly loved and adopted children through faith.

And can there be any greater gift than the Holy Spirit himself? I can’t think of any. And why do I say this? Because this Spirit is the LORD God himself, who created the heavens and the earth, gave life to every living being, gave Jesus every gift necessary to carry out his ministry, was with the apostles as they witnessed the Gospel and has now created faith in our hearts to receive the wonderful salvation Jesus won for us through his cross.

Just think: just as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism – showing him to be the very Son of God, so also the Holy Spirit was given at our baptisms – sealing us as God’s children by creating and sustaining our faith in him. And did the Holy Spirit ever leave Jesus? No. Neither will the Holy Spirit leave us, as we cling to Christ in faith. He will watch over our coming and going – instructing us by means of His powerful word. He will guide us on the right path – protecting us from every evil and danger that threatens the eternal life Christ won for us through his cross.

Yes, the blessings God gave us through Holy Baptism are truly awesome: forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, adoption into God family, and the gift of the Holy Spirit – all of which is received through faith and will result in our living with God forever in paradise. How blessed we are to receive such a gift from God!

Part Three: Who the Sacrament of Baptism is for.

But this leads us to ask the question: who, exactly is baptism for? I mean, there are some churches who won’t baptize children, but only adults. And why don’t they baptize children? Because they claim that children can’t really believe like adults do. To such churches, baptism is a work we do – a means by which we dedicate ourselves to God. But is this true?

No, it’s not true. Baptism isn’t any more a work we do, than what a child does when his parent yells: “I’ve got candy; who wants some?” Is a child “working” or doing anything to deserve that candy by holding his hand out to get what his/her parent promised? No, and neither are we doing anything when we come at God’s invitation to receive the blessing He promises us in this sacrament. Holy Baptism is all God’s doing, not ours.

On top of this, God doesn’t restrict baptism to adults, as our sermon text states: *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*³⁹ *For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far away, as many as the Lord our God will call.”*

In other words, the LORD offers Baptism to all – regardless of age. It is the means by which God wants to share his salvation with others, as Jesus himself says: *Therefore go and gather disciples from all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to keep all the instructions I have given you.* (Matthew 28:19-20 EHV)

Finding cures for disease is often expensive, but also very lucrative. For this reason drug companies never give life-saving medicine away for free. Someone has to pay.

How different our LORD is when it comes to the best medicine of all – the forgiveness of sins. Is this medicine costly? Absolutely – as the Scriptures say: *no one can by any means redeem himself. He cannot give God a ransom for himself— Yes, the ransom for their souls is costly. Any payment would fall short.* (Psalm 49:7-8 EHV)

But the LORD is not like a drug company. Jesus paid the price necessary for our salvation with his own blood. Not only that, but that LORD offers this salvation to all freely through Holy Baptism.

Blessed is the person who believes God's promises and presents his family and himself for Baptism. Why? Because God will do what he promised. He will forgive their sin and adopt them into his family. He will give them the Holy Spirit as a guarantee that they are his dearly loved children. Eternal life is their future. Heaven is their home.

Remember this, brothers and sisters in Christ. Remember the wonderful gift God has given you at your baptism. No matter how much the devil tries to make you feel otherwise, your sins are forgiven in Christ. You are God's child through faith. Eternal life is your future. Heaven is your home. Amen.