

## **A Gift to Remember**

Baptism of our Lord

St. John's January 2020

### **Slide: children**

This last week, I have been waxing a bit nostalgic. As our seminary student John has joined us for this month of January, I'm remembering back when I first met him as his pastor at my first call in Strum. What a delight that he has entered into the process of ordination for the church and in the shared ministry of all the people of God in the world. That vocation, that of pastor, was slowly percolating up from John's baptism; that gift of Christ's very own Holy Spirit, alighting upon him, hearing the words of God call him beloved – that same Spirit – resides, prods, and calls each of us into our daily lives as the called out ones in this world.

With John joining us this week, I was brought back to another memory of mine which occurred during my first month of ministry as a pastor. That very first memory was the first baptism I ever had the privilege to officiate – the little one, called by name as Annika Skoug. No doubt, she is in high school now.

It was Advent and I had only been at Immanuel two weeks. In a moment of love for Annika and of dedication to God's command, Annika's parents brought her to the holy waters, to become a child of God. In her long, white gown and cute little wispy blond hair, Annika was marked with the cross of Christ and became deeply associated with Christ's death for her sake.

Baptisms are special. Yes, we are commanded by God to baptize according to Matthew chapter 28 – “Baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, but it's not only about the commandment. The act of baptizing is a special moment in time, a cosmic moment, whether the baby cries, whether she is in third grade, or whether he is an adult.

Baptism is the one time in the life of ourselves when we cannot claim anything of our own standing, but rather the standing of the living God and God's love for us. The greatest gift of baptism is that it's not something we must scrape, and grope, strive and fight for, as if it were any other part of living the human experience. It's something that God has done for

us *BY* living the human experience.

Yet, I'm not always sure that we know truly what baptism is about. Sure, we hear the words of why we baptize every time we baptize, but like the creed and the Lord's Prayer, do we really, really grasp the wonder of baptism? Sometimes, I wonder. I wonder, because I'm the one who meets with parents as they prepare for their child's baptisms, and there are many reasons why parents bring their child to be baptized and over the years, I've seen various reasons for why children are brought to the font here.

For some people, baptism is kind of like joining the Jesus Club. I don't mean to sound harsh or flippant about that, but I'm not sure I can put it any other way. Sort of like Boy Scouts, the Lyons Club, or even the YMCA, there are some who seem to think that the church is like that, and baptism is the membership rite. Then, members follow the club rules, which in this case turn out to be the rules of Jesus. Now, while as baptism does make us all members of the church of Jesus Christ, and that is a definite

benefit, it's only one reason we baptize.

For others, baptism is like having flood insurance or life insurance. I can remember a grandparent I knew from Trinity Lutheran Church, being so insistent that her grandchild be baptized before the family went on a family vacation. She was afraid that if her granddaughter died without being baptized, her granddaughter would have no life after death. Therefore, baptism became like an insurance policy, enabling the baby to have eternal life if she should die.

Now, while God does promise the "hope of eternal life" in baptism, baptism is not really about some action to save us just in case - in fact, baptism isn't so much about the end of something as it is the *beginning* of a relationship with Christ, a way of life, and a lifelong identity as a Christian in *this* earthly existence. In other words, baptism is not about the end of something, but the beginning of something, the beginning of how we are grasped by God and led to live a faithful life into the time of our eternal life. Of course, that means that when

we are at our deaths, that risen life we were given in baptism is there for us, as it always was in our living.

And, lastly, I have observed others who think that baptism is more of a symbolic action, and therefore, their child may decide at such a time to baptize or not, instead of baptizing their child as an infant. And, yet, the reason why we celebrate mostly infant baptism as Lutherans is because of Martin Luther, who, beyond seeing baptism as solely a commandment with the promises by God, he professed that since the church is for all, including babies, it follows that baptism, the sacrament of entry, is for all, including babies. Luther also saw infant baptism as the purest and most beautiful picture of God's gracious and unconditional love.

Why? Because an infant serves on no committees, has done no great work, and is helpless, needy, dependent and unemployed. An infant is a sign of how we all really come to baptism and come to God: With nothing. We have nothing to give God; therefore baptism is an indication that God is doing something for us. That includes

adults, too, who have not yet been baptized.

Yet, the gift of baptism is clearly there in the reading we just heard from Matthew. Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized by John. Now, John knows that Jesus needs no baptism, because he is the Messiah, the living God on earth. That is why he says to him, I should be baptized by you. But, Jesus is baptized not for himself, but for us. The baptism of Jesus is about us. It is a gift for us to remember.

To fulfill all righteousness by being baptized, Jesus, the one who is already righteous, makes us righteous when we are baptized. Then, when Jesus comes from the water and the Holy Spirit alights upon him, so too, the gift of the Holy Spirit is given at our baptism.

Lastly, when the heavens open to reveal Jesus as God's son, so, too, do the heavens open for us as God declares us to be children of God when we are baptized. As the ministry of Jesus began after his baptism, so does our discipleship begin after ours. The baptism of Jesus is really about

our baptisms. That is a gift to remember.

Therefore, we teach that baptism is about being made right with God, as Jesus fulfilled that righteousness for us on the cross. Baptism is about the gift of God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit which grants us meaning in life, vocation, and membership of Christ's church. And baptism is about being adopted as God's child, through the cross, branded in our foreheads, marked forever with the wounds of Jesus, granting us daily forgiveness of sins through repentance. It is a gift to often and daily remember.

In his book, *Let the Children Come*, Pastor Dan Erlander helps guide parents, sponsors, and congregations to raise a child "wet". Pastor Dan was my pastor in college and he was instrumental in helping me to live "wet", so to speak, the daily drowning to sin that baptism proclaims. This booklet is now the instructional booklet I give to new parents, when they bring their first child to the font to be baptized. In this booklet, Pastor Dan gives 10 helpful hints on how to help your child (and you) remember this gift

of life. Here are a few of his recommendations:

1. Remember that your child's life of faith is not yours to mold. It is the work of the Holy Spirit.
2. Tell the story! Read the story of Jesus and other Bible stories. Through the stories help your child to know Jesus as a friend.
3. Remember you are not alone. You have sponsors, pastors, friends, your congregation, church resources, Holy Communion, Scripture, forgiveness and above all, the presence of Christ who will never leave you.
4. Celebrate your child's baptism anniversary. Light the baptism candle you are given at your child's baptism. Share memories, prayers, and scripture...make the sign of the cross on each other's forehead."
5. Learn ways to keep the seasons of Advent, Epiphany, and Lent at home. Also, celebrate Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost at home with Christian rituals. Do not let the culture determine all of your home rituals.

6. Worship with your child.  
Participate in their Christian life.

**Slide: Affirmation of Baptism**

The baptism of our Lord Jesus is really about our own baptism. This baptism is a gift for us to remember, not out of our own efforts, but out of God's efforts for us, in Christ's death. We were buried therefore by baptism into Christ's death, so that as Christ raised from the dead, so we may too have new life. This baptism, therefore, is about our way of life, our journey, and our very identity as the fellowship of believers.

Please pray with me: Lord Jesus Christ, as called and loved by God, we ask that you help us daily to remember the promises you made for us in Holy Baptism. We pray also for all who are preparing for baptism and for all who are newly baptized: that the Spirit of God will guide them toward growth in faith and wisdom. And lastly, we pray for a deepening awareness of how precious we are to you: that we may know the length and breadth of your love for us and share it with one another, this we pray through Christ our Lord, Amen.