

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Advent 2, Series B
Saturday, December 9th, 2017

Sermon: The Beginning of Baptism¹

Texts: Mark 1:1-8

Focus Statement: God forgives our sins in Holy Baptism.

Function Statement: That they would daily confess their sins in a return to their Baptism.

Sermon Structure: Story Applied

Doctrinal Locus: “What does such baptizing with water indicate? It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (SC, 4th Part of Baptism).

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

Our Gospel reading begins with these words: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1, ESV).² At the risk of redundancy, Mark’s Gospel begins at the beginning. As Maria sings in *The Sound of Music*, “Let’s start at the very beginning/A very good place to start” (“Do-Re-Mi”). Yet unlike the other Gospels, which focus on Christ’s Incarnation, Mark begins with the ministry of John the Baptist. “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). It seems a little strange to suggest that Jesus’ ministry begins with John and not the Savior’s birth. But remember that John’s special mission was to “prepare the way of the Lord” (v. 3), in keeping with Isaiah’s prophecy (Isa. 40:3).

John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord Jesus. He did it by preaching “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” We need to unpack that phrase if we are going to understand John’s mission. What was the exact nature of John’s Baptism? We know

¹ I preached a different message on Sunday, December 10th, 2017.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

from the Book of Acts that John's Baptism was not the same thing as Christian Baptism (Acts 18:24-19:7).

So how are they different? Well, first of all, Christian Baptism is always done in the Triune name of God. Jesus told his Church, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). When you are baptized, the pastor pours water over your head and declares, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In Baptism you receive God's name and become a child of God. John's Baptism, however, did not make somebody a Christian. After all, Christ had not yet come or given the command to baptize. John's Baptism was preparatory, a foreshadowing of the later, greater Baptism to come.

The other way in which John's Baptism and Christian Baptism differ is in the gift of the Holy Spirit. John himself admitted, "I have baptized you with water, but he [Jesus the Messiah] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). I know that some Christian denominations teach that Baptism is merely a symbolic act, an outward sign of a person's supposed decision to follow Christ. But most Christians, including Lutherans, believe that Baptism is a miracle in which something special *actually happens!* In Baptism, God pours out his Holy Spirit into our hearts (Tit. 3:5-7; Gal. 4:6; 2 Cor. 1:22). As a result of Baptism, the Holy Spirit actually *dwells* in us! Our bodies become the very Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). As the Apostle Peter preached on Pentecost:

"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. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:38-39).

The Bible makes a clear connection between Christian baptism and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit doesn't just zap people out of nowhere. Rather, God's ordinary way of doing things is to create faith through his external means of grace, the Word and Sacraments.

We have seen the ways in which John's Baptism differs from Christian Baptism. But there is also tremendous overlap. Remember: John came to prepare the way, and so his Baptism has important connections to Christian Baptism.

The first connection is repentance. John preached "a baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). Repentance literally means to do a 180°, a complete turn-around. Repentance is a change of heart and change of mind. It means turning away from sin and turning to God for his mercy and grace. Thus, those who came to receive John's Baptism confessed their sins (v. 5) and, presumably, tried to stop doing them.

Repentance is an important part of Christian Baptism too. In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther speaks about the ongoing significance and meaning of Baptism in the Christian life:

"Baptizing with water... indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (SC, 4th Part of Baptism).

Contrition means feeling sorry for your sins—not just sorry that you got caught, but sorry for the way that sin gets in the way of our relationships with God and other people. Repentance, as I already said, means turning *away* from sin and turning *toward* God. So according to Luther, each and every day we should take stock of our sins, confessing them to God, whether through prayer or private confession and absolution, and then changing our behavior to live in a way that is pleasing to God. Hopefully, as a Christian you are only ever baptized *once* (Eph. 4:5). But *daily* repentance continues until the day we die or Jesus comes back—whichever happens first.

Forgiveness is the other link between John's Baptism and Christian Baptism. John's was "a baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*" (Mark 1:4). Once again, I recognize that some Christians, especially the Baptists and Reformed, view Baptism as a purely symbolic act. They call it an "ordinance" instead of a sacrament, emphasizing the idea that we have to *do* something for God (after all, ordinance is another word in English for rules or laws). But most Christians believe the Bible that something *happens* in Baptism, namely, the forgiveness of sins. Both the original Greek and our modern English translation are very clear that the purpose or result of John's Baptism is "the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). Ironically, that means that John the Baptist was not, in fact, a *Baptist*—at least not in our modern sense of the term! John certainly baptized people, so maybe we should call him John the *Baptizer* instead. But his baptism very clearly did what the Bible says: it forgave sins. People went into the water as sorry sinners, and they came out as forgiven saints. Out with the old, in with the new!

So too we rejoice that in Baptism, God forgives our sins and gives us eternal life. The Bible says, "Baptism... now saves you..." (1 Pet. 3:21) and "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved..." (Mark 16:16a). Jesus says later that unless we are born of water and the Spirit, we cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5).

Baptism is a wonderful gift! Mark tells us that the Gospel, or Good News, began with John's Baptism. So also our new life in Christ begins in Baptism. Through Baptism, we are buried with Christ in his death on the cross and raised again to new life (Rom. 6:4-6). Or, to use another phrase, we are "born again" (John 3:3).

One of the important themes for today is comfort. In our Old Testament lesson, Yahweh tells the prophet Isaiah, "Comfort, comfort my people" (Isa. 40:1). Baptism happens only once. But it becomes a source of incredible comfort throughout your life, reminding you that no matter

how far you stray from the kingdom of God, the Lord is always ready to take you back. After all, in Baptism he named you and claimed you. You are his, and he will not easily let you go.

That is why Martin Luther encourages us to remember our Baptism every time that we wash our face. He also encourages us to make the sign of the cross and speak the Invocation when we get up in the morning and when we go to bed at night: “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The very same words spoken at your Baptism (and the start of our worship service).

And when the devil tempts you or tries to destroy your faith, driving you to despair, do what Luther did. Fling it in the devil’s face that you are a child of God and declare, “I am baptized!” because your Baptism says it all.

So if you or your child are not yet baptized, please come and talk to me so we can schedule it. Baptism is the beginning of the Christian life. And, as Maria sings, “Let’s start at the very beginning/A very good place to start.” So what are you waiting for? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.