



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

What is baptism? Luther said in the Small Catechism, "Baptism is not water only, but it is water used together with God's Word and by his command." Some of you might remember memorizing that in confirmation class. Christian baptism used water as a sign of washing, cleansing, renewal. But note, it is not water only.

Today is the first Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany, you remember, is when God's glory was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. And Epiphany also explains who we are; the children of God who are claimed and washed in the waters of baptism. We are then sent out to be the light of Christ and go out and share the love of God with all people. And so, this Sunday is dedicated to talking about Jesus's baptism in the River Jordan.

The baptism of Jesus is recorded in all four of the Gospels. Each has a different twist but today we have the story by the writer Luke. Even though there are different perspectives on His baptism, I believe that it is truly a signal of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Luke begins by portraying John as a prophetic figure who calls the people to repentance. After their repentance, John washes them in the waters of the River Jordan, to give them a sense and sign of cleanliness. But John washes with water only. And the people leave

their baptism feeling clean but being the same person as before they went into the water.

Note here that Jesus came for that same kind of baptism by John. And still today that is one of the greatest mysteries theologians discuss. Why did a perfect person, Jesus, have to be baptized? The Gospel writer Matthew said it was because Jesus had a need to fulfill all righteousness. He was baptized to be able to identify with a sinful humanity and make symbolic confession. Others claim that Jesus came to be baptized not as a symbolic action, but rather as an ordination for His role as Messiah. Maybe this was Jesus' way of being set apart, or coronated as King.

When I think of coronation, I think of Queen Elizabeth II, who was coronated on June 2, 1953, just before I was born. She was 26 years old. It took 14 months to plan the coronation with 2 dress rehearsals. 96,000 people stood to watch the procession. The cost was estimated at 1.57 million pounds or a bit over 2 million in US dollars which was a lot of money in the 1950's. The actual ceremony took place at Westminster Abby performed by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Ancient rituals were used including the pouring of oil, and placing the crown on her head, scepter in her hand, giving her the orb complete with cross on the top, and putting the ring on her finger. Such rituals go back to King David, and some say even earlier. This coronation or ceremony was to set her apart from the everyday person and make all recognize her as the Queen of England and the Commonwealth. Since that day her life was never the same.

Jesus' baptism is much like a coronation. John tells us that he only baptizes with water and is unworthy to even untie Jesus' sandals. He goes on to say that Jesus is more powerful and will not just baptize with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Jesus will also separate the grain from the chaff, the believers from the unbelievers. And the unbelievers will have consequences to pay. This coronation comes with a visual as well. The skies open and the Holy Spirit in the form like a dove comes down and lands on Jesus. What a surreal experience that must have been. And then God speaks from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." A great way to signal to the world that Jesus is God's son, the long-awaited Messiah, the King of Kings. This is Jesus' consecration, his ordination for his earthly ministry.

Baptism for us sets us apart too. Not as kings and queens but rather as heirs of a fallen humanity, heirs to God's restored Kingdom as God's beloved children. Our baptism is not the same as the one John did in the Jordan. We

are baptized in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are baptized with not just water, but God's Word over the water, by God's command. Yes, water, that abundant earthly element is used but our baptism is also by the Holy Spirit. The fire of God's love also accompanies us to live as people of God when we are marked with the cross of Christ forever, during our baptismal ritual.

As Luther said, "To be baptized in God's Name is to be baptized not by people but by God Himself. Although it is performed by human hands, baptism, is nevertheless, God's own action. From this fact everyone can easily conclude that it is of much greater value than the work of any human or saint. For what work can a human being do that is greater than God's work." This is a great way to understand the fact that we do not need to be re-baptized. Baptism is a God work and He gets it right every time. No need ever to re-do this sacrament.

And therefore, we understand John's baptism as a symbolic washing, a sign of repentance because it was John's work, not God's. It was just a human ritual or act. But Christian baptism is so much more, it is God's action of washing away our sins and making us a new creation. We are changed at our Christian baptism, changed to inherit the promises of God as children of God. We are made new in those waters of baptism. Paul says it well, "When we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life." "

In John's Gospel, it is recorded that Jesus himself said, "In truth, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit." In Mark's Gospel, Jesus said, "Those who believe and are baptized shall be saved." And Matthew records the command to be baptized. "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."

Paul along with all the Gospel writers tell us whether directly or indirectly to get baptized. It is in God's word that we hear that that is how we receive the Holy Spirit. And it is through the Spirit that we are given the power to become the children of God.

True story as told by Dr James Kagel! There was a man named Mr. Yates. During the Depression years, Mr. Yates owned a great deal of land in West Texas on which he raised sheep. He lived in extreme poverty, struggling just

to feed and clothe his family. His situation worsened until he was in danger of losing his property altogether because he could not even pay the small amount of taxes owed on his land. As Mr. Yates was facing bankruptcy, an oil company approached him. "WE think there may be oil on your land," they said. "Will you allow us to drill?" Reasoning that he had little to lose, Mr. Yates gave them permission. The oil company began drilling and at a very shallow depth, struck the largest oil deposit at the time to be found in North American – a deposit which produces over 80,000 barrels of oil every day! Mr. Yates had become a billionaire! Or did he? No, if you think about it, Mr. Yates had become a billionaire ever since he first acquired the land. The oil was always there – it was just that Mr. Yates did not know about it.

And is our baptism any different? Do we when we are little realized that we are coronated or ordained for a new life of service through that water and God's Word by God's command. We are made his children and heirs. That is why our church prepares young people during confirmation to learn the tenants of our faith so they can affirm their baptism.

Living out our baptismal faith we confess our sins, receive the promise of God's forgiveness, and are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. And it is through that power that we are called to witness to God's love, and we become his children. It is through our baptism covenant that we are sent out to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. AMEN