

Sermon – 2nd Sunday after Epiphany
Genesis 17:1-8 & Luke 18:15-17
January 20, 2019

“Infant Baptism”

It’s been a while, but I still recall Marcella and I pulling into the driveway at the end of a road trip with at least one sleeping child in the backseat. The trick, as any of you who’ve done this can attest, is to transfer said child to the house without waking them. Occasionally we’d pull it off and our little darling was aware of nothing until they woke the next day in their bed.

Then the only evidence of our nocturnal transfer from car seat to house would have been that they woke wearing the same clothes they had on when we left the lake the previous day. They lacked any conscious memory that our trip had ended sometime in the last 12 hours, but that did nothing to alter the reality they were home, it was time for breakfast and their friends were wondering if they could come out and play.

Analogies eventually break down, but in our Lutheran tradition baptism can be understood as “a transfer”. The terms we associate with this transfer are lofty – from darkness to light, death to life, the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of God. My analogy cannot possibly do service to the saving action of God in baptism, yet we teach in our tradition that baptism is no less than God taking us in his arms of mercy and placing us into the restful assurance of eternal life.

Baptism, no matter when during life it is received, signifies what the culmination of life will bring to those who receive it. We will be safely home. My aim this and week and next is to discuss the timing of baptism. If the Bible had an answer my sermons would be brief. Luther discussed the timing question using the phrase “*baptism for those who cannot speak for themselves.*” He knew the Bible neither commands nor prohibits baptizing such persons.

Luther first approached the question of infant baptism with the Old Testament - Genesis 17 in fact. Here God tells Abram to circumcise the males of his household as a sign of the land covenant between God and Abram’s descendants. This occurred just after Abram’s first son was born – his name was Ishmael, born of his wife Sarah’s Egyptian slave Hagar. God tells Abram that he is to circumcise even the slaves in his household, both born and bought. Every male descendant of Abram was to be circumcised on their 8th day. The implication is that God included those who could not speak for themselves – infant sons, and those who might not know what to say – slaves, under the covenant. Luther believed that if God placed such persons under a promise, God would do no less to Christian young through the covenant of baptism.

Moreover, this story, which emphasizes inclusion of Abram’s slaves in the covenant, reinforces two of Luther’s arguments in support of infant baptism. First, God makes promises to whomever he chooses, and second, those promises are conveyed to and through a community - 8 day old Jewish boys as well as men and women not of Jewish lineage were included in the covenant community simply by God saying they were.

For Luther, when Jesus has, in Luke's words "*even babies*" brought to him to be touched, he was signaling to his disciples what lie ahead for the covenant community he would establish after his resurrection – the church – of which they would be the baptizers – the very means through which God's word of grace was conferred. God touches who God chooses – whether his disciples like it or not!

What does this mean with regard to baptism of infants? For that we turn to our lesson from Titus. Paul says "*when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.*" The phrase "*love of God*" comes from a Greek word – "*philanthropia*" – philanthropy, and means "*love of others.*" How does Paul say God's "*philanthropy*" is demonstrated – by washing? Paired with "*rebirth*" the implication is clear – God "*transfers*" us from one kind of life – an "*unwashed one*" to one cleansed through forgiveness by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Many question that baptism can accomplish this, especially for a child – for reasons themselves derived from reading of the Bible. In our tradition, we practice infant baptism because of how God consistently conveyed promises to individuals through the communities those promises created – covenant communities – like Israel and the church. Luther believed it was the prayers and faith of the community that received the grace and promises of God "*for those who cannot speak for themselves*" – most especially infants.

Philip Melancthon, a colleague of Luther's wrote that "*the Father, Son and Holy Spirit baptize you.*" From the first day of creation, the witness of the Bible is that whatever God spoke...became. In Genesis 17, slaves who may have known little of Abram's God and children too young to recognize their father and mother's face were nonetheless declared by God, Jews - children of promise. Whatever God speaks...becomes.

On a desert night under an Egyptian sky, a pillar of fire appeared and Israelite mothers and fathers took their children in their arms, and by faith entered a parted body of water. Of course they entered by faith – at any moment that water could have crashed down upon them. On their heels were soldiers, upon whose arrival death would not be a possibility but a certainty. Faith whose object was a sign from God – a pillar of fire, saved them.

In years to come, God told those moms and dads to tell their children what God had done that night. How many of those children remembered that walk through the darkness to the other side of the sea we'll never know, but whether they did – didn't matter. They were alive because of the faith of their parents. A nocturnal journey in their parent's arms saved them. Like being carried by a parent from the car to a bed perhaps?

Perhaps. Baptism, as we believe, teach, confess and practice it in our Lutheran tradition is a transfer from death to live, darkness to light. It matters not, we believe, if the child remembers the act – only that they are a child of promise, and live in the light because of it. AMEN