

Sermon – Baptism of Jesus
Mark 1:2-11 and Romans 6:1-11
January 7, 2018

“Baptism and the Spirit of Christ”

In Mark 9:40 Jesus has some words for his own disciples who were upset that someone outside their circle was driving out demons in Jesus’ name. Jesus told them “*whoever is not against us is for us.*” Good advice to follow regarding baptism, itself a driving out of demons but for the last 500 years of Christian history has been a source of more disagreement than unity. As we remember the baptism of Jesus we do well to ask “*what is baptism and what does baptism do*”?

Baptism in the ancient Greek language could bear many meanings – washing being the most common. Jews in Jesus’ day had all sorts of ritual washings – cups and pots before they ate, the entire bodies of priests before serving in the Temple, and every Jew was expected to wash before major festivals like the Day of Atonement. Body washings signified readiness to come into God’s presence, and John was all over that – washing people to prepare them to receive Christ.

In some traditions of Christianity, Pentecostal and Charismatic particularly, baptism is at least a two-stage event. Water baptism or “*the baptism of John*” is stage one. “*Baptism in the Spirit*”, also referred to in our lesson today, closes the deal, and makes us Christians. The first baptism is ritual preparedness, the second a personal experience. The first is kindergarten Christianity; the second is “graduate school”. In some Christian traditions infants are dedicated to the Lord which however symbolic, is considered of no real consequence to their salvation - it only sets them on the path to later acceptance of Christ and conversion. Again, it’s preparation.

Do Lutherans believe water baptism makes us Christians? Well, yes and no. No in that a baptism apart from faith is of no consequence. Whether with a consenting adult or a presented child, Luther never considered baptism an event that saved “*just by the sheer act itself*”. But yes, in that in the presence of faith baptism is a promise of the forgiveness sins and the ability to lead a new way life until our life ends. Sure it’s an “*outward act*” – but it’s an act of God. The Ten Commandments are “*an outward thing*” – as is the Apostle’s Creed – but when followed and believed they are words that shape and give content to faith.

Faith must have something it believes, and there is no more important thing for you to believe than this – in baptism your sins are forgiven and eternal life to you is given. Many Christians ask “*how can a ritual event like baptism with water compare to the life changing event of being baptized in the Holy Spirit*” or “*how can a non-consenting event such as infant baptism rank with an adult conversion*”? Lutherans in particular answer “*because forgiveness and salvation are God’s gifts, not our achievement.*” In Baptism holds nothing back. God is not like a parent that might ration Christmas Eve gifts, holding a couple of them for Christmas Day, or saving the biggest and best for last.

In Baptism, God invests himself so fully in us that his Son's name is given to us and "reputation" is dependent on us. The story of Creation says what God names is what it becomes. *"Let there be light...and it was so. Let this one become a child of God...and it is so."* The sun didn't have to learn to become luminous and trees didn't have to learn to bear fruit – they did because that is what God created them to do. Ephesians 2:8 & 10 says *"for it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God...for we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

Yet our sisters and brothers in the Pentecostal or Baptist or Wesleyan traditions have much to offer us. They remind us that baptism must be accompanied by conversion. Remember Jesus was baptized in preparation for his public ministry. The experience of God in your life may be more vivid some days than others, but if a life, yours included does not reflect conversion of your thinking and acting towards the mind and manner of Jesus, than your life has willed itself against God. No conversion experience and no baptism, whether as an adult or a child, means that the person who has it will not have to day by day be converted to God. Such a statement is not Lutheran or Pentecostal by the way – that is simply Christian.

Mark really says nothing about why Jesus was baptized. But in Romans 6:1-11 Paul says that baptism joins us to the death and resurrection of Jesus. God comes to us in baptism as sinners, but we must not think God leaves us this way. We're not, in Paul's mind anyway, alright just as we are. We have been transferred by baptism, a death of sorts -to a new life lived under forgiving grace where we learn to yearn to be obedient to the giver of this amazing grace.

Think of it like this. You were a renter and you had a most demanding landlord. Regardless of how good a renter you tried to be he would barge into your apartment asking for more rent and threatening legal action if you didn't pay up. But one day, you found another place to live and what's more a good friend paid off all what remained under your old lease. But as you settled into your new home, the old landlord pounds on your door, making the same old demands. Instinctually, you go to the door ready to pay what he demands just to get him to leave. Till that is you recall you don't owe him a doggone thing – because you're not his tenant anymore. And you have the paperwork to prove it. Whether trembling or with boldness, you tell him to leave. And you can, because you've been baptized. That is why you were baptized, so that humbly but with immense confidence you might say; *"today, it's going to be God's way."* AMEN