Sermon, March 20, 2022

Matthew 28 Baptism Wings

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

One of my favorite movie scenes is from “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” The movie takes place in the deep south during the 1930s. Three escaped convicts search for hidden treasure while a relentless lawman pursues them.

After two of the convicts are baptized in a river where a preacher washes away all their sins, which they take to also mean all the guilt and responsibility for their law-breaking actions, the three continue on in a stolen car to find the treasure. The two try to convince Everett, played by George Clooney, that he should have joined them in having their consciences, their souls and yes, their police record cleaned and cleared.

Everett responds….Join you ignorant fools in a ridiculous superstition? Thank you anyway. Baptism….you two are dumber than a bag of hammers.

What is this thing called baptism? I did a random search on the internet about baptism and found quite a lot of answers. Some I would say reflect our Lutheran understanding of baptism. Some I would be tempted to say were written by people dumber than a bag of hammers.

Paul focuses us on what baptism is in our text for today. Paul tells us nothing about Jesus’ own baptism. There is no story of John the Baptist or the Jordan river or doves or voices from the heavens. The mechanics of the ritual are never explained by Paul.

We know that there is one crucial ingredient when it comes to baptism. You have to have water. A seminary professor once asked this question: If you were called on to do a baptism in the middle of the Sahara desert, what would you do? This…(lick thumb.)

The water is required for a baptism. When I was a youth and an acolyte at my home church, one of our responsibilities was to assist at the baptism. The pastor gave us all instruction on what to do. He mentioned that he always used warm water in the flagon so the baby wouldn’t be shocked and then cry during the baptism.

One particular morning when I was assisting with the baptism, the pastor noticed that the altar guild ladies had not put water in the flagon. He sent me out to get some as the congregation waited. I remembered the warm water part and went to the ladies’ room to fill it up. However the flagon was too big to fit under the spigot!

My only option was to use the water fountain. You know the temperature of that water! I don’t remember if the baby cried or not when that cold water hit its head, for I was too self-conscious at having to go the long distance out of the church, take a long time to find water and to come back, to care.

I found this little tidbit from Luther’s Table Talk, a book of Luther’s comments from around the dinner table with his students and family. …Some one sent to know whether it was permissible to use warm water in baptism? The Doctor replied: “Tell the blockhead that water, warm or cold, is water.  I thank Luther for getting me off that hook.

Paul doesn’t give us any information about the water temperature or the amount of water to use. He doesn’t care what we wear or what time of day it is. Paul is much more concerned about what baptism means for us. When we think of baptism, we often think of new life, a new member of the Christian family, a new birth.

But Paul’s first comment about baptism is about death. Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

The imagery of death is strong for Paul. He uses words and phrases such as death, buried, crucified and died eight times in these six verses.

This should be of no surprise to us. Paul focuses his preaching and teaching on Christ crucified. We have no stories of Jesus’ life in his letters. We hear nothing of a Christmas story, of healings, of miracles such as feeding 5000 people or stilling a violent sea.

The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is central to Paul’s message. Without his death, there can be no resurrection. Without his resurrection, there can be no life.

So our baptism is our death as well. In our baptismal liturgy, it is called the baptism of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

As we enter the waters of baptism, death comes to us. We are drowned in the waters and die. We are joined to the death of Christ on the cross.

But just as the cross was not the end of the story for Jesus, it is not the end of our story. In baptism, we have been buried with Jesus. As baptized people, we walk in newness of life.

Paul still holds a tension in his baptismal theology. We have been buried into Jesus’ death in baptism, but our resurrection is yet to come. Because we are joined with Christ in the death of baptism, we also look forward to being resurrected to eternal life like his.

It is that “now, but not yet” aspect of Paul’s thought. We have died to sin in baptism, but we still live in this world. Our resurrection into a life like Christ’s is a promised future. So what then do we do?

Have you ever wondered what your life would be like had you never been baptized? I find myself wondering how I might be different had I not received that gift at six months old. I don’t know what it is like to live as an unbaptized person. I have lived, as Paul says, dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

I have lived as one no longer enslaved to sin. All of you who raised your hand that you are baptized are no longer enslaved to sin. Now raise your hand if you have never sinned? I did expect maybe one or two hands from our baptized!

No longer enslaved to sin doesn’t mean that we do not continue to sin. Paul reminds us of the power of sin a little later in this chapter when he says “the wages of sin is death.” Sin, the separation from God, only brings death. And that is a death from which there is no resurrection, no ever-lasting life.

In this now, but not yet time, we still find ourselves sinning. However, in our baptism, we have been freed from sin and death. Sin no longer can threaten us with the specter of death because Jesus has overcome death on the cross.

As I said last Sunday, Luther admonishes us to return to our baptism daily. In this Lenten season, as we reflect on our sin and the sacrifice of Christ for our sin, it is an opportune time to consider baptism, especially our own.

Each day we can remember our baptism. As we encounter water throughout our day, as we shower or brush our teeth or wash the dishes, we can remember to proclaim---I am baptized! Our baptism is a powerful reminder that we do walk in newness of life. We are renewed to live in love and service to God.

That is what makes baptism a very public event also. We, as baptized Christians, are to live like we are different. A common phrase that had some popularity a few years ago was to *walk wet*. We are to live our daily lives in a way that shows we are baptized, that we have new life now and that we live in the promise of eternal life.

In my first parish, there was a gorgeous baptismal font made out of one huge block of stone that was intricately carved. It was located in a baptistery that was equally ornate. And it was off to the side of the nave where the congregation could not see from the pews.

So, baptisms were done after worship with just family and a few invited guests who could fit into the room. In the three and half years I served there, I only saw one baptism during a regular worship service. The grandfather of the baby held a bowl of water for the baptism so that it could be done in the front of the church, not in the separate room.

While the room was impressive, I thought it took away from the meaning of baptism. While baptism is offered to individuals, baptism also connects us to the body of Christ. We are connected not only to Jesus’ body in his death and resurrection, we are connected to each other as brothers and sisters. We are connected as Christ’s body in this world and in the next.

Baptism is one of two sacraments for Lutherans because of Matthew 28: 19. 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. This command of Christ joined with the earthly element of water instituted the sacrament of baptism.

When we were baptized, we were given the assurance of forgiveness and new life in Christ. Being baptized also assumes responsibility for living it out in our daily lives. We are live out the gospel, sharing the good news that will draw others into the Christian life.

Last Sunday, I said the sermon could be titled Baptism Roots. Today’s could be Baptism Wings. Our baptism gives us wings to fly, to fly into a life freed from sin and death. Our baptism can take us to new heights where God inspires us to share the gospel. Being baptized gives us endless possibilities for making disciples of all nations.

Step back to your own baptism. What does your baptism mean to you? What does it mean for you to live as a baptized person? How will you walk wet in this world?

When you encounter water today—over your kitchen sink, as you take a cool drink, in your shower, make the sign of the cross. Make the sign of the cross to remember the words…in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Make the sign of the cross to remember that you have been baptized into Christ’s death and his resurrection. Remember that you are a child of God, baptized and set free to serve him and all people. Proclaim…I am baptized! Amen.