

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD | JANUARY 7, 2024

GENESIS 1:1-5 | PSALM 29 | ACTS 19:1-7 | MARK 1:4-11

If I were allowed to make one change to the Nicene Creed—this a hypothetical, don't go call the bishop just yet—I wouldn't go after the God-the-Father gendered language stuff. I wouldn't go for the Christology stuff about Jesus being Light from Light and true God from true God. I would take this line in the third article, "We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins," and I would delete "for the forgiveness of sins."

I would take it out not because it's wrong, but because it draws our attention away from what's actually important, something that's at the heart of the readings we heard today.

We—"we" meaning American Christians—tend to have a very individualistic view of sin.¹ Sin is something I do. Maybe something I chose not to do. In any event, it's definitely about *me*. My decisions. My actions. My words. The problem in my life is that sometimes I make the wrong choice. And the solution is that I need to be forgiven. So I come to church, I hear God's promise of forgiveness, and then I go out and try again.

Because we have an individualistic view of sin, we tend to assume an individualistic view of baptism, too. In our tradition, confession and forgiveness flows out of baptism. Which can make it seem like we remember our baptisms to periodically wipe the slate clean.

There's some truth in all this, but if the only way we think about baptism is as forgiving individual sins, it raises some questions. For one, what about systemic sin? When we think about racism and prejudice, our destruction of the environment, or hunger and poverty, surely these are caused by more than the bad choices we made since last Sunday. And if baptism is just about being forgiven for the mistakes that we make, then why do we baptize infants? Infants don't do anything wrong. In fact, they don't really do much of anything except eat, sleep, and cry. What do they need to be baptized for?

Thinking about baptism this way also raises some questions about stories from scripture, too. Consider today's gospel reading. If Jesus is free from sin—if his life is completely open to love of God and neighbor—then why did he have to be baptized? Jesus's baptism is the first story in Mark's gospel. So Jesus hasn't done anything wrong. In fact, he hasn't done anything. So why is he being baptized?

These are good questions. Not because they're particularly difficult, but because they help us think about first principles. To return to the way the authors of scripture talk about baptism. And when we do that, we see that our American focus on individual sin is really just one little part of a much larger whole.

We heard a good example of that larger whole in today's reading from Acts. In this story, Paul encounters a group of disciples. Paul asks, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They reply, and I think it helps to see some humor in their response, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." So there's some miscommunication going on. And the next line helps us understand what the disconnect is. "Then [Paul] said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism.'"

¹ It's difficult to underestimate how much contemporary American religious culture is rooted in the Second Great Awakening. See Derek Cooper, *Exploring Church History* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2014), 128.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481

(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

So we can start piecing together what's going on here. When John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness and told people to repent and be baptized, this was a group of people who accepted his invitation. They have been baptized by John, they've repented, they've reoriented their lives. So far, so good.

But notice that Paul doesn't ask *who* baptized them. He asks *into what* were you baptized.² In other words, it's about where you're headed. What's your goal. What's your end. And the answer is, they don't really know. They've turned their lives away from where they used to be. But they haven't really turned them toward anything.

We use different words for this feeling. Aimlessness. Languishing. Puttering. Just sort of killing time. This past fall, one report found that three in five young adults say their lives lack meaning and purpose.³ And maybe you feel the same way. Living, doing stuff, but not really headed anywhere.

This is the kind of situation that Paul finds this group of disciples in. And so Paul invites them to be baptized, Luke tells us, "in the name of the Lord Jesus." That means being baptized into or sharing in Jesus's mission. Caring for the downtrodden, working for reconciliation and peace, proclaiming that the fullness of God's mercy has come near in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So instead of just killing time or languishing or puttering around waiting for life to happen, they have purpose, direction, and mission.

The word we use for this in our tradition is "vocation." The ways that we love God by serving our neighbors. And Luke suggests that this vocation is not something that we find for ourselves but something that is given to us in our baptisms.

This puts baptism in quite a different light than the old "it's about forgiving my sins" worldview. If baptism is just about forgiveness, then it's only about what happened in the past. If baptism is just about wiping the slate clean periodically, then it can never really free us from our worst tendencies. If baptism is just about my individual choices, then it doesn't really connect me with other people. But if baptism is about our purpose, then it's also about where we're headed in the future. If baptism is about mission, then it draws me into new relationships, not just with Jesus, but with other people, too. And if baptism is about discipleship, then it changes us and forms us into Jesus's way of life.

And if baptism is about more than just individual forgiveness, it helps answer some of those thorny questions we had, too. Why was Jesus baptized? To begin his public ministry. To inaugurate his mission of proclaiming that the kingdom of God was here and showing people what that meant through healing, serving, and breaking bread. What does baptism have to do with systemic sin? It unites us to the ministry of Jesus that seeks to change not just our hearts, but cultures and norms and values and structures. Why do we baptize infants? To include them in God's mission. So that as they grow up, they know that their lives are never without purpose and direction and meaning. To affirm that they are a part of God's work of renewing and restoring creation.

And this is exactly why we use the Affirmation of Baptism to confirm our confirmation students and to welcome new members into our congregation. It's not because

² Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

³ "On Edge: Understanding and Preventing Young Adults' Mental Health Challenges," *Making Caring Common*, October 24, 2023, <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/on-edge>.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

we think the right things. It's not because we all agree on everything. It's because we all have the same purpose. Our baptism into Jesus's mission is what holds us together.

So maybe, hypothetically, if I were to make a change to the Nicene Creed, I wouldn't delete the part about baptism being for the forgiveness of our sins. But I would add something. Try this. "We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sin *and to unite us in God's mission.*"

Our baptisms don't mean that we never grieve or experience loss or disorientation. But they do mean that we never live without purpose or direction. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, but we know where we're headed. And we know who is leading us along the way.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor