

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Baptism of Our Lord • January 12, 2020**

**Isaiah 42:1-9 • Psalm 29 • Acts 10:34-43 • Matthew 3:13-17**

When people come into this sanctuary for the first time, what do you think the first thing they notice is? Most of the time, the first thing they notice is the font. Not tucked away in a corner but right there as soon as you walk in. After we moved the font back there a couple of years ago, someone came into the sanctuary one day and exclaimed, “It’s right in the middle of everything!” They were talking about where the font was in the church, but they were also, perhaps unbeknownst to them, making a very profound statement about the role of baptism in our lives. Baptism is the foundation of our lives of faith. It is the way people are initiated into the life of the body of Christ. And it is what we live out through our vocations in the world.

Contra what we often hear, baptism is not some box you have to check for God to love you or an insurance policy for your salvation. It’s not about being bound to a particular denomination or congregation. Nobody gets baptized Lutheran or baptized Methodist or baptized Episcopalian. As we confess in the Nicene Creed, we all have the same baptism.

To put it very simply, baptism brings us to the place where Christ is. That means that Jesus’s relationship with the one he calls the Father is now your relationship. So when the voice from heaven says that Jesus is the beloved with whom God is well pleased, well, that is what God is saying about you. If that is the only thing you take from this sermon, that’s is all you need to know. Baptism brings us to the place Jesus is so that the words Jesus hears from the one he calls the Father are the same words that God says to you.

But baptism also changes something else. Not just between us and God but between us and God’s creation. And it helps to stop here and think a little bit about how we imagine Jesus’s baptism. When you heard today’s gospel reading, how did you envision it in your head? Many of our depictions of Jesus’s baptism feature an idyllic afternoon, lush grass, cool water. Jesus and John stand in the shallows of the Jordan River with the tiniest spritz of water being dropped on Jesus’s head. Baptism is safe, pleasant, comforting. We imagine Jesus’s baptism like Sunday in the Park with John the Baptist.

This isn’t necessarily bad, but we should be aware that the way we picture Jesus’s baptism shapes how we think about our own baptisms. It’s not a coincidence that in many churches baptism is thought of mostly as a life passage for babies. And so the font gets taken out when there’s a baby to be baptized and put back in the coat closet when they’re not. Someone mentioned to me a couple months ago that they really wanted to have their baby baptized but they got busy with other things and now the kid was a toddler, which meant they were too old to be baptized. Which is wrong. You’re never too old to be baptized. But if all you knew about baptism came from the baptismal banners churches we hang up in church and the baptism cards we buy at CVS, that would be a pretty reasonable assumption.

The Eastern Orthodox church imagines Jesus’s baptism quite differently than we do.<sup>1</sup> In many of their icons, Jesus is shown standing not in the shallows but in the deep with water rising up to his neck. And around Jesus’s body we see fish, serpents, and sea monsters. Jesus is plunging into the abyss below. In fact, those icons of Jesus’s baptism look an awful lot like the icons depicting Jesus descending into hell and liberating Adam and Eve from the bonds of death.

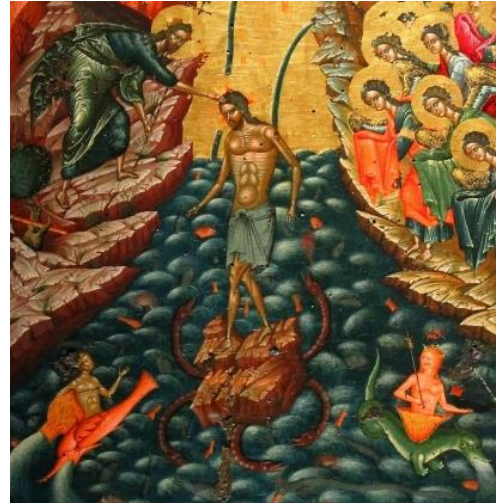
---

<sup>1</sup> Alfredo Tradigo and Stephen Sartarelli, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church* (California: Getty Publications, 2006), 122. Icon pictured is detail from “Baptism of Christ” by Onufri in the sixteenth century.

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

At first, the icons are a little disorienting to look at. *What exactly are we supposed to paying attention to here?* But they remind us that Jesus's baptism is not about a little bit of water being poured on Jesus's head or Jesus checking some box before he can start his public ministry. It is about Jesus bringing the design of God's great love into the chaos of the world.

And if we believe that baptism brings us to where Jesus is, that means our baptisms can bring us into situations we find confusing and problematic, distressing and chaotic. So if you intend to live out your baptism, if you intend to grow into Jesus's relationship with God through the power of the Holy Spirit, it may end up taking you to places that you'd rather not go.



Sometimes our response to meeting Jesus in the chaos of the world is fear. In the most recent issue of *The Atlantic*, there was a fascinating story about how one religious community has responded to that uncertainty.<sup>2</sup> The Society of St. Pius X, an order of Catholic priests, practices a pre-Vatican II brand of Catholicism that would have been typical one hundred years ago. It's not so much conservative as it is anti-modern. Mass is said in Latin, any potential temptations to sin, including swimming pools and country music, are to be avoided, and women are expected to stop working when they have kids. And it's when they have kids, not if.

As you can imagine, these beliefs put them out of step with most of American society. And many of their members found it difficult to live in a community where they had to constantly negotiate how to live faithfully. So the Society decided that they would retreat away from the world and set up a new community in St. Marys, Kansas, population 2,500. The population of the town has doubled since they began arriving four decades ago, and the six Sunday masses require overflow rooms at every service. The Society has created an ideological and religious sanctuary.

You can see the appeal, of course. You don't have to interact with people who don't understand your beliefs. You don't have to explain things to your neighbors. You don't have to be around anything you don't want to be around. But there's also something lost. Something significant. They've made it easier to follow the rules of their religion, but they've made it much harder to live out their faith. It's hard to follow Jesus and view other people as a burden. It's difficult to live out your baptism if you won't leave your neighborhood. And it's nearly impossible to care for the world God so loves if you are scared it might change you.

But sometimes our response to that chaos and uncertainty of the world is faith. Our reading about Peter from Acts today is one of those stories. Peter has been called by God to go out in mission. And Peter thinks that's great. Love to be in mission. Love to tell people about Jesus. Until he meets this man named Cornelius and has to decide whether Cornelius can be part of this new community. On the one hand, Cornelius gives to the poor and prays often and wants to be a part of the community. On the other hand, Cornelius is a Gentile. And the rules around whether Gentiles can become part of this community and how they are supposed to enter are still up for debate. So letting Cornelius and his household in would be extremely controversial.

---

<sup>2</sup> Emma Green, "The Christian Withdrawal Experiment," *The Atlantic*, January/February 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/01/retreat-christian-soldiers/603043/>

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

So Peter is in a tough spot. You follow Jesus into the world and suddenly you're not just spending time with people like you. You're right at the edge of your own understanding and comfort zone. You're not in Kansas anymore.

Eventually, Peter receives a vision that God can make clean the unclean and ends up baptizing Cornelius and his family. They get brought into God's covenant through their baptism. But what's more interesting than Cornelius being baptized is what Peter says in today's reading when he meets Cornelius. He says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." This makes it sound like Peter knows exactly what's going on here. Like, "I truly understand. The answer is obvious." But it's actually the exact opposite. The verb tense here suggests an ongoing process. So we'd be better off reading Peter's statement as "Truly, I'm *beginning to understand* that God shows no partiality."

That's really different. And that's good news for us. Because when we live out our baptismal callings in the world, when we follow Jesus into the waters of the deep, things often aren't clear. They're often murky. We can't see exactly what the right thing is. Sometimes we have to make decisions without knowing exactly how things are going to turn out. But Peter trusts that God is capable of doing something beyond his understanding.

People often refer to this story as the conversion of Cornelius, but it's really Peter who's having the conversion experience. Because Peter follows God's call into a difficult situation and trusts that God can meet him there. In fact, Peter's faith grows precisely when he steps beyond the bounds of what's known and comfortable. And through this encounter with someone who seems like an outsider, Peter begins to understand that there are no outsiders in the body of Christ. The thing that seems like a barrier, like a border, in Peter's mind turns out to be nothing in the eyes of God.

And that's really what baptism is all about. It's about being brought to the place where Jesus is. Not to the banks of some storybook river, not to some world of our own making like St. Marys. But to the places that are complicated and tense and unclear and murky. We don't always know where Christ is taking us. But truly, we are beginning to understand.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor