
⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, ⁵he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life.

Throughout time, God has been a god of words. At creation, he spoke the world into existence with only his voice. He uses words to communicate with his people, and he gives words to his people to communicate with each other and with him. And who could forget those words of salvation? “It is finished.” “He has risen!”

God's words carry power. His words are the main things he uses to create and sustain and save. But God also knows our human condition. He knows that the sinner is critical of all words, even those of God. So, in his love for a world of sinners, God doesn't just tell us, “Trust me. Take me at my word.” God gives us signs to support his word. And he gives one of those signs in the sacrament of baptism.

We know that salvation does not come from ourselves. Paul writes: “he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves”. I do not choose God. I don't have the capacity to choose the God of the Bible off a list of many gods, like choosing off a menu at a restaurant. Why? Because by nature I'm a sinner. By nature, I'm an enemy of God. By nature, I'm spiritually dead. No, I cannot choose God with my rational human faculties. I can't even make my heart warm and cozy to invite God in.

Salvation, start to finish, comes from God and God alone. It comes through Christ, the one who bought us from sin, death, and the devil with his holy and precious blood. But how do you know that what Jesus did at the cross counts for you? You know it, because God's word says that this sacrifice is for all. And God's word also says it's for you. But again, God knows how critical we are with words. He knows that our sinful and simplistic minds will still doubt those words he speaks. So, he goes a step further.

Paul continues: “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior”. God brings this salvation to us in baptism, which is simple water paired with God's inspired and unchanging word. And Paul provides the picture of washing and rebirth to describe what baptism does.

Baptism is death by water and word. We know that we are sinful by nature. We know the thoughts and desires of our human hearts and minds are contrary to God's will. Because we are by nature at odds with God, we need all that is evil within us to be wiped out. To purify us, what is harmful and evil must be drowned and killed. In the waters of baptism, the sinful nature, which once dominated everything that we thought, said, and did is choked out. Baptism is death.

But at the same time, baptism is new life by water and word. After a hard day outside in summer, covered in sweat and dirt, taking a shower makes you feel new. In the drowning of the sinful nature, baptism makes you new too. While all your sin and tension with God is put to death, you come out righteous and clean and renewed. And this isn't simply a feelings thing. You don't just feel like you have a new life. In baptism you do have a new life.

St. Peter also uses this picture of water as a purifying force in 1 Peter. He says: “These spirits disobeyed long ago, when God's patience was waiting in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In this ark a few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal

of dirt from the body but the guarantee of a good conscience before God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” God used water in the time of Noah to put the sinful unbelieving world to death and bring new life to the eight believers in the world, Noah and his family.

Baptism, therefore, puts to death all that is evil in you and creates all that is good. And that new life is faith, created and strengthened by the Holy Spirit in this sign that God connects with his word.

This makes baptism the greatest solution to any identity crisis. And we know that we all deal with different identity crises throughout our lives, sometimes because we’re critical of ourselves and other times because we are critical of others. A young child sees a scary world all around him, filled with people bigger and stronger. He often lives in fear, trying to show what strength he has by acting out in violence as a coping mechanism. A teenage girl starts judging herself with the focus of a microscope. She’s never content with how she looks, she feels out-of-place even among friends, and she wonders when the nightmare of teenage angst will finally disappear from her life. A middle-aged man wonders what life is for. His job has lost its excitement, his marriage feels listless, and his kids are at the age when they don’t appreciate anything he does for them. But what makes him feel the worst are the temptations he’s been fighting back to do something drastically selfish, whether it's abandoning his family or abandoning life itself. An elderly woman loses her husband of decades. And now the home is silent. Now the family table is just set for one. Sure, she gets plenty of visitors, maybe even more than when her husband was still alive, but the hole in her heart is not filled. She knows God’s promises to take care of her, but most of her prayers start with “why?”

We know that none of these crises are uncommon. Our lives are filled with the guilt of our own sin. Our lives are scarred by us viewing the world not through God's lens, but through our own human lens. Do you know where you fit in? Every single hour of every single day? Or do these people's stories sound a lot like some of your stories?

There are certainly solutions that the world comes up with to solve a case of identity crisis. But all of those solutions are ultimately the same. All of those solutions deal in self-righteousness. They tell you that you are a good enough parent, friend, or employee, even when you know deep down that you're not. They encourage more self-confidence, even though you know that every ounce of self-confidence you can muster is ultimately just covering for a lot of uncertainty. Self-righteousness is the solution to identity crisis that does not work. It's the reason people brag about themselves, so that they can feel like they are people of importance. It's the reason people gossip, putting others down so that they can feel superior. Again, building up our egos is just slapping a fresh coat of paint on a fence whose boards are already rotted through. It will not bring peace and security, but that doesn't mean we don't try to slap three coats on and hope for the best.

No, the solution is the opposite of self-righteousness. Because we know that righteousness is never earned. It is always a gift. We see that every gift comes from God, and we know that he uses the power of his word to give these good gifts. Just as at creation, God spoke us into existence. Within our mothers' wombs, he said, “Let there be Yvonne.” “Let there be Jerry.” “Let there be Elizabeth.” Let there be Lisa.” “Let there be Savannah.” “Let there be Braxton.” But God gave you another gift, just as important as life. In water and word, no matter if you were a little baby or an old grandpa, God said, “Let there be a Christian.” “Let there be my child.” These gifts were free. You didn't do anything to earn them. But they were earned for you. And that means God's love is yours regardless of the things you have done and the things you will do.

In baptism, you receive the righteousness of Christ as the Holy Spirit works and strengthens faith in your heart. God looks at you as his perfect child, because he has adopted you, put your sinful self to death with Jesus,

and raised you to new life. He has marked you in these waters with his name, like an invisible tattoo that can never wear off.

But now comes the question: How do I live in my baptism? Well, don't look at your baptism as a one-time event. It's not some rite of passage. It's not some graduation into the church. It's who you are. You are in Christ, united with him in his death and resurrection. You are a new creation. You are important to God. And no circumstance of life can ever take that away from you.

But we still have that sinful nature in us, fighting to lead us down the path of sin and unbelief. Sure, the new self, created in the image of Jesus, is always at odds with it, calling us back from the ledge of rebellion against God. But hourly, we fall from that ledge, sinning in our thoughts, words, and actions. And that might lead us to wonder if our baptisms didn't take. The Christian says, "I know I'm baptized into Jesus, but why do I keep doing evil?" Friend, this is exactly what your baptism is for. And this is why baptism is not just something that happened to you a long time ago. It's something that you're living in right now.

Baptism means death and it means life, just as Paul writes here to Titus. And listen to how Martin Luther describes the baptismal life: "Baptism means that the old Adam in us [the sinful nature] should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." When you fall short and sin, where do you go in contrition to find forgiveness? Just as always, you go to Jesus. You go to the one who has forgiven the sins of the world. But how do you know he's forgiven your sins? Of course, he's said it to you in his word, but he's also sealed that word to you in water, so that you could feel your forgiveness run down your head. Living in your baptism means living a life of repentance, unafraid to daily confess your sins to God and undoubting that each one of your sins have been forgiven. Why? Because it's not about what you have done. It's about what Christ did for you and in you.

So, for the child who fears his weakness, he is strong because his protecting Father is the creator of the universe. For the self-critical teenage girl, she's beautiful and enough for God because God sees her with the perfection of Jesus, with the beauty that comes only from his righteousness. For the man in mid-life crisis, who hates the sinful thoughts of his heart, he finds forgiveness in his Savior and sees that God has once again given him a new life to live today, free from the grief of the past and with the purpose to serve in all his callings. And for the lonely widow whose life feels like it is getting smaller and smaller, she remembers that the God who gave her life and made her his long ago has not forgotten about her and has not made a mistake in her life. Even at her old age, she is still God's child, and God always works all things for the good of his children. Why can any of these people find comfort in their trials of life? Because they've been reborn and renewed through the washing of the Holy Spirit in baptism.

So, one more question: Why does God use water in baptism? He could use anything else paired with his word, but he chooses water. Why? Because water is plentiful, just as his grace is plentiful. When I look out over the bay or go up to Marquette and look out at the expanse of water separating us from Canada, I'm reminded who I am in Christ. When I turn on the faucet to wash my hands, I'm reminded who I am in Christ. When I look at the baptismal font up in front of church every week, I'm once again reminded of who I am in Christ. And does he have enough water to wash away all my sins? Of course. In fact, he did it with only a few ounces of plain water joined with the powerful words of the one who spoke everything into existence and spoke you and me from death to life.