Advent 3, December 15: Baptism 1st and 2nd part

*What is Baptism?*

Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God’s command and combined with God’s word.

*Which is that word of God?*

Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Matthew: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19)

*What benefits does Baptism give?*

It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.

*Which are these words and promises of God?*

Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Mark: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:16)

We have now reached the last portion of the catechism, which teaches and explains the 2.5 sacraments: baptism, confession/absolution, and Lord's Supper. What is so special about the sacraments? Remember Luther’s analogy of a sick person? He asks “what does a critically ill person need to know in order to be saved?” If you have cancer, what do you need to “know” to be saved? Well, first you need to know that you are sick. It is so obvious but often neglected in the spiritual side of things. We need to know we are sick and dying. Sin kills. And the 10 commandments show us exactly what kind of a sinner we are. Sin is so deadly that it has affected our nature. It is so deep that it is not something we can deal with by our own reason or strength. Thus the next thing to know is the doctor who can do something about our sickness. We need a doctor who is good enough who can and who will actually treat us, and not simply telling us to drink some water and get some rest and it will go away. Sin does not go away, death will not die, until this good doctor himself dies for the sins of the whole world. And then he gives us a way to call upon him, namely, the Lord’s Prayer, for knowing the doctor does not get your to him or him to you. And now that we have called upon him, he actually comes to us. The disease is so pervasive that he comes to us and performs a surgery and checks on us regularly and prescribes this medicine that gives eternal life.

This is what the sacraments are, God coming down upon us, not some 2000 years ago way back when, in that little piece of land on the other side of the globe, but here, in and through these things which he promised to work. No doubt these so-called sacraments are, for the most part, very important part of the church life regardless of denominations, and yet many are still confused about baptism and the Lord's Supper, so much so that at least 1 church body officially no longer practices either of these. Indeed, I mention baptism and the Lord's Supper quite often in sermons and bible studies, but we still need to review and be reminded of God’s teaching. So today we will look at the first 2 parts of Luther’s explanation of baptism, namely the “what” and the “why” of baptism, and next week we will look at the “how” and “who” of baptism, though of course they are all interrelated within baptism itself.

What is baptism? Luther’s answer is very simple: it is water included IN God’s command and combined WITH God’s word, as recorded in Mt28, which is our main text for baptism. The command comes from here (along with Mk 16). The other texts usually describe baptism but it does not have the same “force” as these 2 passages because here Jesus as the resurrected lord who holds all authority in heaven and on earth commands his church to do this thing called “baptism”. And water is used because the word “baptize” in the Greek simply means to “wash”. So it is a washing IN the name of God. This is no small thing, for God’s name is not merely an identifier, but it is holy and belongs to him alone.

But today, especially in north America, many consider baptism as nothing more than an external ceremony with the use of water. And since it is merely an external thing, a rite, a ceremony, a tradition, it really doesn’t do or achieve or effect anything, or so they claim. Besides this, they like to claim that God in fact DOES NOT use external or material or physical things because he is spiritual. So then baptism simply cannot be anything more than what we see and touch. To claim anything more is to be superstitious, which of course should not be found in Christianity. What is baptism? For them it is just water ceremony.

Here we must not try to reason with God but simply let God and his word has the final say. Baptism is water with the word/promises of God. The operative agent here is always the word. If nothing else, the word of God alone ought to humble our hearts and minds so that we may receive this gift with great joy and thanksgiving even if we should be fools and have no understanding concerning baptism and have no clue as to how to use it for our benefit. We should at least have this much of an understanding, that this is a gift from heaven, it is not a work of man, it is not our dedication or commitment of our great faith. This is God giving something to us for our salvation. And you who have been baptized carry this with you daily. You have this heavenly gift of salvation. Let the scoffers scoff and let the unbelieving heart mock this water, but you, you ought to know what great treasure you have, because we have learned what this is for.

This gets to the “why” of baptism. Why do we baptize people, and why are we baptized? We have already mentioned that this is actually a command. It is not a suggestion. It is not subjected to our opinions and decisions and fancies. Jesus commands his church to do this, so we do. This is why we do baptisms. Those who reject baptism, whether it’s the church who refuse to baptize people or individuals who refuse to be baptized, they are in fact rejecting Christ. But do not think for a moment that because you have been baptized, you can relax, for those who treat this gift lightly or neglect baptism are just as guilty as those who don’t have it. It is not small thing when you take the word of God lightly, especially if you claim to believe those same words.

Besides this, we are baptized in the name of God. Though it is performed by human hands and spoken by a human mouth, it is nevertheless God’s work because baptism saves. It washes away sin and guilt and brings new life. No man can do such great work except God. And here the name of God is applied on you so that you are marked as belonging to God. Indeed, this marks you as the enemy of Satan also. You become his primary target now that you have the name of God. But the same mark protects you because you belong to God. This is why we are baptized because through it God calls us as his own, he claims us as his dearly beloved children of God in Christ. Where else can you find such protection against the devil and all his horde?

And this leads to the last reason for baptism and it’s also what I talked about last time when I talked about temptation and evil which we pray in the Lord’s Prayer. The only solution to the problem of sin and death and the devil is always the forgiveness of sins. This is what baptism offers. This is really the main purpose of baptism: to wash away all your sins.

As I mentioned earlier, there are still much confusion concerning this aspect of baptism. People will ask, “how can water forgive sins?” or they say something like “only Jesus saves”. And then we are charged with idolatry because we say that “baptism saves”, which is actually a direct quoted from the bible (1Pet 3:21). And then there are others who are offended because baptism makes it too easy, that just a splash of water will save a person, especially referring to infants. They think that faith is an intellectual commitment and obviously babies do not have the capability to do that. So to them, infant baptism is the parents forcing their religion on the baby, which is totally unfair.

At the heart of all these confusions is an unbelieving heart. It is not believing that God can and does work through these external things. It is not believing that the word of God and the promises that he gives are a matter of life and death. It is not believing that his word is effective, that it does what it says. And we would do well to read, learn, meditate, memorize these words from scripture, from Mt28 and Mk16 and what they mean as Luther has taught us with his simple answer. For we are often tempted to think lightly or even not think at all such matters, nor consider these great gifts that God poured forth in our lives.

And yet it is for this very purpose that we have baptism and rightly use it, that is, to unite again and again with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For the forgiveness of sins that is freely offered in baptism is FOR the FORGIVENESS OF SIN. Therefore repent and return to Christ and find the comfort and consolation that is from his cross. When you encounter temptation and sin, come back to this gift and be renewed.

This is what baptism is. It is a washing by the word of God FOR the forgiveness of sins. It is God’s work and yet at the same time it is by external means. And next week, we will look at the “how” and the “who” of baptism.