

The Word of God we will consider today is the Gospel from Matthew chapter three.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – my dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

If I asked everyone in church today to stand up, walk outside, and run around the building three times what do you think would happen? (Maybe I should find out... ☺). I'll bet that the first thing that would happen is someone would ask me, "Why?" "Why should I go out and run around the building? And why three times? What on earth is the purpose of this strange request?"

Typically if we are asked to do something that might seem a little strange we want to understand the reason why we're doing it... what the purpose is. Makes sense right? Well today in our service we are focusing on baptism. I think if I asked you all what baptism is, most of you would be able to give me a pretty good answer. Baptism is when we take water and put it on someone while speaking the words: I baptize you **in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19)**. We know what it is... But the question that many people outside of the church, and even some inside the church, might ask is, "Why? What's the point of pouring water on someone and speaking some words? What is the purpose?"

What is the purpose of baptism? Well, let's think about that a little today while we explore the purpose of baptism for Jesus and the purpose of baptism for us as we consider the Gospel from Matthew chapter three. There we see probably the most famous baptizer of all time – John the Baptist – and definitely the most famous person to ever be baptized – Jesus himself. And you notice the question in John's mind when Jesus comes to be baptized is essentially that same question we are asking right now, "Why? What's the purpose?" Or as he puts it, **"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14)**.

A pretty good question don't you think? I mean, John knew his role... he knew what God had sent him to do. Before John the Baptist was even born God had revealed the reason he would be sent: **He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:17)**. The whole purpose of John's life was to prepare people to meet the Lord who had come in the flesh. John did this by calling people to confess their sins, to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins, and to live in that forgiveness as true believers whose hearts were prepared for Christ. John came to point the people to Christ.

But now as Jesus Christ appears on the banks of the Jordan what do we see? Do we see Jesus crying out, "I'm here! The one John proclaimed is here! Turn to me and see your salvation!" No. Instead we see Jesus get in line with the rest of the people who had gone out to see John and be baptized by him. Jesus – whom the Christmas angels had proclaimed to be the **Savior, Christ the Lord** – Jesus who is God himself in flesh... he gets in line with the sweaty, dusty masses and takes his place in line to be baptized. Why? What could possibly be the purpose for Jesus, God himself, to be baptized? Baptism was something done for those who needed forgiveness. Jesus had no need of forgiveness. And baptism was not one of the Old Testament laws that Jesus was obligated to keep in order to live perfectly under God's laws. So what is God doing being baptized?

Well, that was John's question, wasn't it? He knew that if there was going to be a baptism at that moment... Jesus was the one who should be baptizing John, not the other way round. And yet Jesus gives a very simple and yet profound answer to John's objection, doesn't he? **"Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."** (Matthew 3:15). Now what does that mean? Well, baptism offers the forgiveness of sin. It's not a law to be kept. It's the gospel given. And so when Jesus says they are fulfilling all righteousness he is not saying this is a law that he had to keep. He is simply saying that this is part of God's plan that he came to fulfill.

Jesus came to this earth to not only die for a world of sinners but to live out his life as one who would walk in their shoes... who would be like them in every way except for sin. And so Jesus' baptism identified him with the world of sinners and publicly marked him as the one who would stand in as their substitute before God. The apostle Paul describes Christ's substitution for sinners by telling us, **"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."** (2 Corinthians 5:21).

So to recap... what was the purpose of Jesus' baptism? Well it wasn't to give him forgiveness... he didn't need it. It wasn't to give him powers that he didn't have before... from his conception by the Holy Spirit onward he was and always would be the God-man whose power and glory were equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit. And Jesus' baptism was not done to fulfill some Old Testament law... no... Jesus was baptized because he came to be the substitute for sinners. He would live as they lived. He would identify with them as he was baptized like them, suffered like them, hungered like them, cried like them, and even died like them. And because Jesus lived a perfect life in your place... facing the same trials, temptations, and difficulties (and many more far worse than we will ever have to face)... because of this you can know that you have a Savior who is truly your substitute... your stand-in under God's law and under God's wrath.

Of course there was one more thing that God used Jesus' baptism to accomplish... God made it clear in a very public way that Jesus was not just another sinner in a line of sinners. No, as Jesus walked out of the Jordan river the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are all present... affirming that this One is different than other men. **As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."** (Matthew 3:16-17).

What a moment... God the Father declares publicly that this is the eternal Son of God... God the Holy Spirit publicly shows the world that his power rests upon God's Son just as it always had... and God the Son stands there obediently... humbly... and is publicly glorified and acclaimed as the one who is loved by God... who pleases God... and who came to reveal God to a world of sinners... to bring peace with God to a world of sinners.

And that is really the answer to the second part of our question today. What is the purpose of your baptism? There are some that might say baptism is simply what you have to do to obey God. After all Jesus himself commanded that his people, **"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). But if we see baptism as simply another commandment that is to be followed we are missing the real purpose of baptism. Your baptism is not something you do for God. It's something God does for you. Baptism is not you keeping God's law. It's God pouring out his gospel of grace and mercy upon you.

Just look at how Scripture describes baptism... When Jesus' disciple Peter spoke to people who did not yet have faith in Jesus he told them: **"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."** (Acts 2:38-39). Why be baptized? **For the forgiveness of your sins... to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit**, that is, the gift of faith and new life which the Holy Spirit alone can give. And this promise is not just for you but for your children... this promise of God is for all.

And if the question comes up, "How can water do something so incredible? How can water forgive and give faith?" Well, we can answer the same way Martin Luther did when he wrote: *It is certainly not the water that does such things, but God's Word which is in and with the water and faith which trusts this Word used with the water. For without God's Word the water is just plain water and not Baptism. But with this Word it is Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of rebirth by the Holy Spirit.* (Luther's Small Catechism).

And why would Luther say that? Well he was simply echoing the truth spoken in God's Word where we hear: **[God] saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:5-7).**

When you were baptized God made the blessings earned by Christ's life and death your personal possession. The holy life of righteousness lived by Christ... the forgiveness earned by Christ on the cross... these gifts earned for the world became your personal guarantee of salvation and life eternal. Baptism connects you forever to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And so you can look at your baptism every day as the robe of righteousness which you wear... as God's pledge to you that you are holy in his eyes... as the strength of God to drown daily the sinful nature which rises up to attack you and accuse you. The purpose of your baptism is not so that you had a one-time blessing of God... no you were baptized so that every day your faith would cling firmly to the certainty of your salvation... the certainty of God's love for you... God's forgiveness... and God's power living in you to fight sin in this life.

In fact God makes that connection clearly in his Word where he says: **Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:3-4).**

This means that when temptations rise up against you... the desire to scream at your kids... to berate your husband... to gratify your lust... or your addiction... when the temptation to harbor anger at your family... or at God... to give up your study of his Word... to seek power and wealth instead of pursuing God's Word and seeking the spread of his gospel... yes when these or any other temptation comes calling you know you have a sure defense. You can say: "Satan, hear this proclamation: I am baptized into Christ! I am not so soon enticed!"

And when your weak flesh fails you and you succumb to temptation... don't let the devil or your conscience accuse you then either! No, you can say, "I am baptized into Christ. God put his name on me and I am his. His love and forgiveness go before and follow after me. My baptism assures me that God loves me. He has pledged his love to me and sealed me to him forever through water and his Word."

Don't you see, baptism is your strength for temptation. It's your refuge when you fail. It's your motivation to get up and try again. Why? Because in baptism God connected you to Christ and made you his own forever. This truth is what we begin worship with as we hear the Words spoken at our baptism: **In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.** This truth is what we are reminded of as the pastor absolves us of our sins saying, "I forgive you **in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.**"

God put his name on you. By your baptism you belong to him. This is the truth you can remember at the start of every day... and it's the truth you can cling to at the end of your days. You are baptized. Christ's merit is yours. Christ's death is yours. And his resurrection will be yours as well. You are baptized into Christ... you are a child of Paradise! Thanks be to God! Amen.

Brothers and Sisters – **[God] anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come... it is God who makes [us] stand firm in Christ. (2 Corinthians 1:21, 22, 21).** Amen.