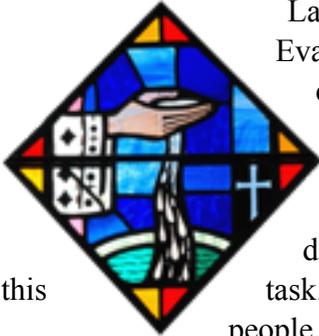


What is Baptism?

Luke 3:15-22

The Baptism of our Lord - January 10, 2016

The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams



this

die. I

Christians have been told that if they are not baptized they will go to hell because only the baptized get to go to heaven.

Last year Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton invited congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to take a look at a document called “The Use of the Means of Grace.” This document basically lays out our church’s understanding of the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. The point of the exercise was to review and reflect on our congregational practices in light of this teaching document. So we did, spending two adult education sessions to task. I began our conversation about baptism by asking why we baptize people. One of the very first answers was so that we won’t go to hell when we

suspect a great many Christians believe this, and perhaps even more non-

It is true that the church has historically taught that baptism is necessary for salvation,¹ but when we turn to Scripture we find ambiguous and conflicting statements. So Mark 16:16 states “the one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.” Is being saved the same as going to heaven? Is being condemned the same as going to hell? What about the thief on the cross to whom Jesus promises “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). The thief on the cross was not baptized, all he did was ask Jesus, “remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). What about that poor man Lazarus who died was carried away by the angels to heaven while the rich man was tormented in Hades (Luke 16:19)? Heaven and hell are certainly not connected to baptism in that text.

Over time, it seems that idea that baptism is necessary for salvation has come to mean that baptism is a requirement for life with God now and in the hereafter. This kind of thinking does stress that baptism is really, really important, but it also contributes to the idea that baptism is a ticket to heaven — just get it done and you’re safe.

To baptize is to immerse, dip, soak or drench something or someone in water. Baptism is an ancient spiritual practice that appears in a variety of forms in almost all of the world religions. Chapter 3 of Luke’s Gospel introduces two kinds of baptism.

¹ Augsburg Confession (BC 42.1-2), The Apology of the Augsburg Confession (BC 183.1-2), Luther’s Large Catechism (BC 459.23-25).

John the Baptist was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3). John invited people to repent — to change their minds and the direction of their lives, to recommit themselves to living faithfully according to the covenant God had made with their ancestors at Mount Sinai. He invited people to do this at the River Jordan — a place of historical, political, and religious significance in ancient Israel. This is where the ancient Israelites first entered the Holy Land. Immersion in the waters of the River Jordan by John the Baptist was a kind of re-enactment of that ancient historical event that combined (1) a public confession on a person’s part that one had not been living faithfully in relationship to God and one’s neighbors, and (2) an equally public commitment to change one’s life.

John tells his audience that the baptism he practices is in preparation for the coming of one who is more powerful than he, who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire, who will separate the wheat from chaff. In other words, the real thing has yet to arrive.

Then there is the baptism of Jesus which is the foundation for our understanding of what happens to us when we are baptized. Luke doesn’t actually recount Jesus’ baptism itself, providing only a very brief summary of what happened after Jesus’ immersion in the waters of the Jordan River. As he was praying, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form as a dove, and a voice from heaven addressed Jesus personally, declaring: “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The first thing we note about the baptism of Jesus, then, is that it was a public declaration of who Jesus was — God’s beloved son. Our baptism is similarly a public declaration of who we are — God’s beloved children. Baptism publicly proclaims and affirms our primary identity as persons who are so precious to God that God becomes one of us, sharing our mortal life, dying on the cross to remove all the barriers that separate us from God. As Professor David Lose writes, “Baptism suggests that we best understand “who” we are by paying attention to “whose” we are — God’s beloved children. Baptism reminds us that we have infinite value and worth, that God wants only good things for us, that God will always seek to draw us back into relationship with God and each other, and forgive us when we stray, and that God will be with us all the days of our lives.”²

That it is a voice from heaven that affirms and proclaims Jesus’ identity as God’s beloved Son is also significant. That voice from heaven makes pretty clear that baptism is something that God does. It is God’s voice speaking, and God’s Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus. What that means for us is that our baptism is also God’s work, even though the sacrament is enacted by a human being — it is one of those God’s work, our hands things. Consequently, to borrow again the words of Professor David Lose “we can have confidence that no matter how often we fall short or fail, nothing that we do, or fail to do, can remove the identity that God conveys to us. In other words, ***our relationship with God is the one relationship in life that we cannot screw up***

² David Lose, “What is Baptism” available at <http://www.davidlose.net/2013/01/what-is-baptism?>

because we did not establish it. We can neglect this relationship, we can deny it, run away from it, ignore it, but we cannot destroy it, for God loves us too deeply and completely to ever let us go. [Trusting that this relationship is safe and secure in God's hands] we are freed to give ourselves wholly and completely to the other important relationships in our lives."³

The third thing we learn from Jesus' baptism is that it inaugurates his ministry. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus leaves the River Jordan and is led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he fasts and prays and is tested by the devil. The Spirit then leads Jesus back home to Galilee where he begins to teach in the synagogues. When we are baptized we are inaugurated into a life of discipleship empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus' mission becomes our mission. Just as Jesus' needed to be prepared for his mission by spending time in the wilderness — we need to be prepared. We do so by living among God's faithful people, receiving Word and Sacrament, learning the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments, learning the Scriptures and how to pray. It is through all these means that the Holy Spirit works to equip us for Christ's mission: we learn to trust and rely on God, we are inspired to proclaim Christ through word and deed in our daily lives, we are moved to care for others and the world God has made, and energized to work for justice and peace in our families and neighborhoods.

As we can see, the baptism of Jesus has nothing to do with going to heaven; but everything to do with Christ's mission and ministry in this world. Modeled on the baptism of Jesus, our baptism then has little or nothing to do with going to heaven, and everything to do with how God empowers and equips us to participate in Christ's mission here and now.

Please pray with me:

We give thanks, oh loving God, that in your beloved Son you have bound our lives to yours. In the waters of baptism you claim us and affirm us as your beloved children, help us to believe that we are of infinite worth and value to you. You bestow on us the gift of your Holy Spirit to teach and equip us to walk in the way of Christ, give us the faith and the courage to rely on you as we go about doing your work with our hands together. Amen.

³ David Lose, "Preaching a More Meaningful Baptism" at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1624>.