

During Advent we celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus and our rebirth in him through the waters of Holy Baptism, which began with Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. This morning we're going to talk about what this means for our walk with God and with one another.

## OPENING PRAYER

### MATTHEW 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; <sup>17</sup> and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

John the Baptist's baptism was unique. Never before had Jews been baptized, for baptism was reserved for proselytes, converts to Judaism. The Jews themselves had absolute confidence that Abraham was their spiritual father, and that the promises God gave to him were for them, that they were children of God by virtue of their heritage.

But they hadn't heard from the Lord for over 400 years. So they wondered if they were under God's judgment. It was like the way you feel when you come home and your spouse or parent won't talk to you. You begin to wonder, "Did I do something wrong?" So it was for Israel, and when John the Baptist told them there was something wrong, the people came forward in droves, being baptized as if they were new converts.

The people received John's baptism as an outward sign of their repentance. However, Jesus himself did a miracle: When God proclaimed from heaven, "**This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,**" Jesus changed this physical symbol of repentance into a transformative, supernatural event. As he himself said, he had fulfilled "**all righteousness.**"

St. Paul wrote a lot about what baptism does for us. In his epistle to the church in Rome he wrote,

## Romans 6:1-11

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup> By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. <sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with Him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup> For one who has died has been set free from sin. <sup>8</sup> Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. <sup>9</sup> We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him. <sup>10</sup> For the death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Paul began this teaching with the rhetorical question, **“Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1)** It’s “rhetorical” because we know the answer, as Paul himself exclaimed, **“By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it!?” (Romans 6:2)**

But why not sin that God’s grace may abound? We love to sin and God loves to forgive: It’s the perfect arrangement.

But it’s tiring, isn’t it, to keep coming back to the same altar, with the same confession, with the same plea for forgiveness over and over again? We sound like a broken record to ourselves, and we don’t like that song. We want to grow, to become truly godly people. But it’s hard to get that old tune out of our heads. “To do the same thing over and over again, and expect different results,” is the definition of insanity, and we wonder if we shouldn’t be committed.

We know that if one drinks too much, he’s going to have a hangover in the morning. But he keeps drinking. We know that if one always takes offense when someone disagrees with him, he’ll leave behind a trail of broken relationships. But his heart rages nonetheless. We know that if one is always working and never spending time with his children, he will probably not see much of his kids when he retires. But he continues to be a workaholic anyway. We hate putting on weight, and we know we shouldn’t eat a sack of potato chips and drink half a liter of Diet Coke every night before we go to bed, but we keep on doing it!

Thus the old saw, "if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got."

Paul wrote, **Romans 6:3-5**, "**Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?** <sup>4</sup> **We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.** <sup>5</sup> **For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.**"

A three-year-old girl was in church with her family watching a full-immersion baptism. Suddenly, she let out a blood curdling scream: "Pastor pushed that man into the water! Why'd he do that, Daddy?!" Her father tried to explain how the man's old spirit was being drowned with his sin. But the little girl screamed even louder, "Why didn't Pastor just spank him?"

In Baptism, God doesn't spank us. He kills us! Which is to say, everything that separated us from the love of God dies. We usually think about baptism in the category of life, but first the Lord needs something to bring to life, as Jesus said, **John 12:24**, "**unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.**" Thus baptism begins with our immersion into Christ's death.

But Jesus didn't stay dead. He rose from the grave on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, and therefore "**by baptism**" we are "**united with Him in a resurrection like his,**" and we "**walk in newness of life.**"

It's like getting a new computer. The old one was too slow. It had viruses and bugs, it crashed all the time, and it couldn't be used with all the nifty new software and hardware. It was NOT fixable. But here's the latest and greatest! All the latest bells and whistles, and the sky's the limit with what we can do!

That's how Paul wants us to think about our new life in Christ. We've got the latest and greatest spiritual software and hardware the blood of Jesus can buy!

But, alas, this new life seems so hard to take hold of. Paul wrote, **Romans 6:6-7**, "**We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.** <sup>7</sup> **For one who has died has been set free from sin.**"

The difference between people who are slaves and those who are not, is freedom. A slave is freed when he dies. Before Jesus was our savior that's what we had to look forward to: death.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are no longer slaves, for our old man died in baptism and we are free. But we often act like slaves, don't we. Why? Out of habit? Because of an addiction? Because this is how I was raised? Because this is the way things have always been? Because I'm afraid of change? Because it's the easy way?

I remember old Ted. He had just returned home on a flight, and he went to get his luggage in baggage claim. In a hurry, he ran to grab his bag off the revolving carousel just before it cycled through the canvas flaps into the back room and out the other side again.

But Ted's health sometimes made him a little shaky on his feet. So as he reached for his bag, he became dizzy, lost his balance, and fell onto the stainless steel carousel! So there he was, flat on his back, riding the conveyor through the flaps into the darkness, hanging onto the handle of his suitcase.

Several thoughts went through Ted's mind as he rode the conveyor: He thought, "I've always wondered what was behind these flaps." And then he thought, "I could get arrested!" And then as the conveyor carried him under the flaps he thought, "Now is probably not the best time to get off!"

So he rode the belt, still gripping the handle of his suitcase, until he passed through the flaps again and into the light, at which point he looked up into the angry face of an official looking woman to whom he said, "Have you ever tried this?!" And she bellowed, "No!" And he said, "Don't!" Then he tightened his grip on his suitcase and swung his feet to the floor.

Without ever consciously intending to, we fall onto the conveyor belt of life, and we grip our bag of stuff, luggage filled with bad experiences, nasty habits, broken relationships, and loads of regret which we should've let go of a long time ago.

But when St. Paul said we could walk in the "newness of life" he had something else in mind. He wrote, **Romans 6:8-11**, "**Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him.**<sup>9</sup> **We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him.**<sup>10</sup> **For the death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God.**<sup>11</sup> **So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.**"

The Lord has reached down and grabbed you by the scruff of the neck and pulled you clean off the conveyor belt of this world. He did this because He loves you.

Sometimes we think that God's love is like a fuel additive for an old car, something to keep us running until we take our last breath. But that's not what God's love is at all. God's love is a love that changes, transforms, enlightens, and lifts us up from the darkness of sin, death, and the devil, and gives us life. God's love doesn't just sustain us, but it changes us.

The Scripture reads that Christ died, and with him we also died. The Scripture reads that Jesus rose from the dead, and so with him we also rose from the dead. The Scripture reads that our Lord cannot die again, and for that reason we shall never taste the sting of death.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, when you were baptized, your old man was buried. When you were baptized, God raised you from the dead and blessed you with eternal life as his son, his daughter. When you were baptized, God filled you with the Holy Spirit, and he made you an inseparable member of the body of Christ, the communion of saints. The only thing that stands between us and our fulfillment of God's call on our lives now is faith in this glorious Gospel.

Friends in Christ, this week let us give thanks for our lives in Christ because of the miracle of baptism. We are free; we are alive; we are children of God.

This week let us consider new ways we can use our new life in Christ to make a difference in this world.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.