

Living by Faith: Week 1 - What is Baptism?

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In our baptism God has called us to be His own Child, connecting us to Christ and His Death and Resurrection. As God's children, we remember our baptisms and thus remember that each day is made holy because we are all in Christ.

By the summer of 2013 I had done everything that needed doing. I had been accepted into seminary, I had registered for my first class, I had my books, and I knew where I was going to be living on campus. The only pressing issue now was how, exactly, was I going to get all my belongings from Sacramento, up to Oregon to pick up my dad, and then east to St. Louis. I decided there was really only one logical answer. Sell everything. All my furniture, by beloved stereo I'd had since high school, all my furniture...everything but the bare necessities and shove it all into my Toyota Corolla and hit the road. It certainly wouldn't have been the first time I packed my life into the back of that car and moved across the country. Thankfully, though, it would be the last.

Fast-forward to the summer of 2017. In the previous four years I had picked up a few things. A wife, first and foremost. A dog, of course. A newly acquired but inoperable VW. And a seminary degree that earned me the right to be sent back west to this place called Sunnyvale. Of course, now, life no longer fit in the back of a Toyota Corolla so the question once again was...how do we get all of our stuff from St. Louis to California. Ah, a moving truck! They make these things so you don't have to sell everything you own and can make it safely from here to there and they are, it turns out quite handy!

Fast-forward once more to the summer of 2018 and it's time to move again but thankfully it's not half-way across the country but just across Gresham Avenue. No need to pack a car or a truck. Just one really strong neighbor and a good old fashioned fireman's brigade...oh and a couple people to push a car...and we're good to go.

There are a lot of ways to get from here to there. I'm not sure why I needed experience to teach me that a moving truck is the best way to do that...short of just moving across the street, of course. But I did. And that's OK. I like to think it makes for a good story although Jen just shakes her head.

Regardless, though, as we enter into this final sermon series on Luther's Small Catechism we remind ourselves that we do so because Luther himself said that there is enough there in the catechism to keep him occupied for his entire life. It's a short, simply book that we read in confirmation class yet we can never actually master it. So we return to it for the next six weeks so that we can once again glean from it what God has to teach us. This final series of catechism series' is an important one. We've talked a little bit about the doctrine...the beliefs of our faith as we looked at the creed. We talked about a life of prayer in the Lord's Prayer.

Over the next six weeks we are going to be talking about living the life of faith. And those things which God has given us to sustain us throughout our journey. See, if

there's one thing that we know about living a life of faith is that it isn't a straight line. It's not straight, constant growth. If it was a graph, the line isn't always going up and to the right.

Instead, there are times when we feel dry. When we feel empty. When we feel hungry. For all the times in life when we feel the presence of God in our lives, there are many more times when we simply don't. There are times when we forget what it's like to experience God's love. That's the reality of the situation. The life of faith is one of ups and downs. And time spent in the middle.

And as a people of faith we get tired. We get worn out. We lose hope. We lose the excitement and passion that we had last year or last month or last week. So what do we do? More importantly, what does God do?

He has given us these *means of grace*. Using physical things...ordinary things...plain old *things* to get his grace from one place to another.

Think of it like this: Jesus was crucified on a cross on a hill just outside of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. Jesus was raised from the dead, rolling back a stone from a 1st century tomb 2,000 years ago. Yet we say that in these acts, the death and resurrection of Jesus we now have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life...indeed we will share in the resurrection of Jesus when he returns.

The question, then, is how. How do these incredible acts of Jesus 2,000 years ago affect us and, yes, benefit us, here and now...today in Sunnyvale, CA. How do we *receive* these benefits? Well, we return to our topics from Luther's Catechism. Baptism, confession and absolution, and Holy Communion. What, along with God's Word preached to us, make up the Means of Grace. They are the ways in which God takes what has been accomplished for us by Jesus and delivers those gifts to us here and now.

God takes the forgiveness, life, and salvation that Jesus won for us on the cross and through His resurrection and delivers them to us in baptism, through confession and absolution, and in Holy Communion. Through these means, God creates faith in us and sustains that faith throughout our lives. It's in this way that God enables us and equips us to be people who are Living by Faith...the title of our series for the next 6 weeks.

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So you'll notice that God does this extraordinary thing through *means*...through really quite ordinary means. Through water, through bread, through wine, through words...spoken and written on a page. As we consider together baptism this morning, and in particular our own baptisms, we rightfully wonder how just a little bit of water can do what we're claiming that it does. How can a little bit of water be the means by which God delivers his promises to us, His children?

You know, I've seen people baptized in a with all kinds of different water and even different methods of applying water. I've heard of some people baptized with water from a well in Africa. I've seen people baptized in the Jordan river, probably right about the same place that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River. I've seen people dunked in swimming pools or big galvanized feeding troughs. I've seen infants baptized with just a teeny bit of water. I've seen my niece baptized in the cold waters at the confluence of the Clark Fork and Bitterroot Rivers in Missoula, MT.

And those are all cool things...symbols and places that are meaningful and important. But at the end of the day, it's not about well water or river water or tap water or bottled water. It's all just two hydrogen molecules attached to an oxygen molecule. And, frankly, there's not too much special about that. It's all just water.

So, again, how does water make such amazing things happen in Baptism? How does water end up being a means of God's grace? Well, it's not the place of baptism, it's not the time of the baptism. It's not the water in which one is baptized. It's the Word of God, the promises of God, attached to that water which makes all the difference. As Jesus commands his disciples to go and make disciples, and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God has attached His Word to the most ordinary element. There is nothing special about this water except God's promise to us.

Our text for this morning from Romans 6 puts it in these terms:

3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized^b into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death^c in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead^d through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.^e

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.^f 6 For we know that our old self^g was crucified with him^h so that the body ruled by sinⁱ might be done away with,^a that we should no longer be slaves to sin^j—7 because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.^k

Baptism, then, is the way in which God unites us with the death and resurrection of Jesus. We die to our sin, our brokenness...and we are raised to new and everlasting life. This is the promise of God connected to the water in baptism. It's not the water. There's nothing special about the water. It's all about God's Word. It's all about God connecting us to Jesus in this very ordinary yet incredibly miraculous way.

There's nothing special about the water. And, you know, there's nothing special about the one being baptized either.

A good friend of mine just lost his grandfather. His grandfather, it seems lived a hard life. He was an alcoholic and he wasn't the greatest father in the world. But towards the end of his life, my friend's grandfather started getting connected back into the church (or connected to the church for the first time). Towards the end of his life, he expressed that he wanted to be baptized but, according to my friend, the church said no. That this man wasn't "good enough" yet. He wasn't good enough to be baptized. This church had certain benchmarks, evidently, that one must meet before baptism. A certain moral bar one must rise above, I guess.

But Scripture and Luther's catechism have no such benchmarks or thresholds. There are really no requirements. In fact, there is nothing special...again with the water. There's nothing special with the one getting baptized (or for the one doing the baptizing, for that matter). It's all just plain and ordinary. It's just water. It's just a human being...sinful...born into this broken and sinful world.

It would all just be really ordinary...except, of course, for the Word. The word and promise of God. This is where all the action is happening.

So when we begin our service with the invocation, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we recall this baptism....we recall this Word of God which has connected to this death and resurrection we recall the grace of God has been delivered to us in our baptism. We recall that we have been recipients of God's mercy as He sent His Son Jesus to the cross.

So then, as followers of Jesus, throughout this journey of life, God comes to us when we feel tired. We we feel doubt. When we feel lonely, scared, when we don't know which way to go. God comes to us again and again to remind us of who we are and what He has done for us. In that triune name of God, we have been baptized. We are *His* children...connected to the life-giving death and resurrection of Jesus.

And in this way, we live by faith as small or as weak as that faith might be, knowing that God has delivered to us the forgiveness of our sins, eternal life, and salvation in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.