

“Death, Rebirth, Resurrection, Revival”

“When we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into His death. We were buried therefore with Him by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life. 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.” [Romans 6:3-5]

Thus begins the liturgy for funerals in the Lutheran Book of Worship. It is a reminder that there are two very important themes connected with our baptisms — death and resurrection.

A while back I was talking with some folks and the topic somehow turned to missionaries, and, as such conversations tend to lead you down a variety of rabbit trails, that got me thinking about the several missionaries I have known who served in Papua New Guinea. I was reminded that, as is the case in most countries where animism is the reigning religion, missionaries in New Guinea have a very difficult time getting people past superstition to faith.

There are a host of reasons for this: they are being asked to trust the word of a total stranger who is strange not only because he or she is a newcomer, but strange in appearance, speech, and attitudes; they are being asked to reject something that has been part of their whole life — nay, has governed their entire life — on the say-so of this stranger; they are being asked to step into something — a brook or stream — that they have become absolutely convinced will kill them.

People in New Guinea believe that evil spirits live in moving water — hence, they will not wade through rivers. Imagine then how hard it is to convince them to step into that river so that a good Spirit can take over and provide them abundant blessings — every baptism under such circumstances is indeed a miracle (there have been some 150,000 such miracles through the Gutnius Lutheran Church).

This all came to mind as I was pondering today’s sermon with the

realization that most of us, myself included, tend to take for granted baptism in general, and our own baptisms in particular.

In my first congregation, after I had been there about five years, one of my Elders, a man then in his early forties, said to me, “*Pastor, in the time you’ve been here, I’ve heard more about baptism than all the rest of my life combined.*” He was feeling mildly disturbed about that; I was feeling just great about that. He didn’t think he needed to be reminded of his baptism — it was there, but it was not supposed to be central. Yet it is supposed to be central. It is where and how we got tied to Christ, and where and how we reap the benefits of His death and resurrection — “*buried with Christ . . . raised with Christ.*”

Now you may say, “*Certainly we know that, Pastor; after all, we are here when children are baptized and we hear the words of the liturgy that remind us, ‘In Holy Baptism our gracious heavenly Father liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Come one, how dense do you think we are?*” It’s not a matter of denseness, or ignorance, or intelligence — it is a matter of focus.

Luther reminds us: “*Remember your baptism.*” He suggests that we do this every time we wash our face or take a bath (and yes, for the nitpickers among you, that applies if you shower!) But Luther does not mean simply that we remember that we are baptized — that would be like remembering that you’re an American, or right-handed, or married . . . all of them important components of who you are.

“*So what?*” is the issue. I am an American. What does that mean? Is it a mere accident of birth, or does it involve in something I want very much to be part of my life? I am right-handed. That means that I am among the great majority of people on this planet. Does that give me some kind of entitlement? I am married. Now, just imagine if I went up to Kristine every now and again and said to that fact, “*So what?*” Do you think that might have some impact on our relationship? I had better know and live the “*So what*” involved there.

When Luther encourages us to remember our Baptisms, he is inviting us

to go deeper with the meaning that Sacrament gives to our lives. Remember Forgiveness . . . so that what can happen? Remember Rebirth . . . to be busy at what? Remember New life . . . which is to be different from the old life how? Remember Spiritual empowerment . . . to what end or purpose? Remember Pilgrimage . . . toward what goal?

Remembering your baptism is so much more than knowing a date and place [although there may be some benefit to knowing that — each year I ask Confirmands to fill out a form about their own baptisms; they are to fill it out by interviewing their parents (and others) about the day they were baptized . . . since most of them were baptized as infants, they have little conscious memory of the event, so I ask them to find out what kind of day it was, who was there, who did what?]

Remembering your Baptism is more than that. It is tapping into the blessings and benefits of baptism . . . which are? *“It effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare.”* [Luther’s Small Catechism]

So what are we to remember about our baptisms? Today’s lessons clue us in.

The Gospel is about John the Baptist and the Baptism of Our Lord. Luke’s account of the actual baptism of Jesus is quite brief: ***“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”*** Just two verses. One might have thought that, if this is such a big deal, it surely would have warranted more press. Sometimes Luke is expansive; other times, like this, he is the soul of brevity. But he includes the essentials: Jesus is baptized. Jesus is declared the Beloved Son . . . That’s really all we need to know.

Since we are joined to Christ through our Baptisms, we need the assurance of who He is — because who He is is connected to who we are, and who we hope to become. And, as we heard St. Paul earlier, we

know that we are tied to Christ's death and resurrection, which, in turn, ties us to eternity.

Now all of this is very Lutheran. We Lutherans are quite big on Sacraments; and we make it easier on ourselves by insisting that there are only two (okay, we fudge on that just ever so slightly, because, even though Confession and Forgiveness do not fit our definition of Sacrament — *“A sacred act instituted by Christ and done at His command using common, visible means connected with His Word . . .”* — we do understand that confession brings forgiveness, and therefore functions sacramentally).

We focus, with Baptism, on death, rebirth, and resurrection. But I think we miss something . . . or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we either conveniently forget or consciously refuse to include something. When Luke records in today's Second Lesson that the Samaritans *“had accepted the word of God,”* he tells us that *“the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them . . .”* Lutheran ears should be attentive — Word was proclaimed and no connection to the Holy Spirit was made, even though that word was accepted? That's not what Luther said would happen! Can there be a separate outpouring of the Holy Spirit apart from proclaimed word? Apparently so.

So that brings me back to my *“So what?”* question. Lutheran theologians for centuries have been warning us to steer clear of “sheer emotionalism.” Sometimes I wonder if such theologians think that Jesus had only a left brain — I suspect that might be the case for some of them.

Can emotions run away with us? Of course. And sometimes we want them to, like when our favorite team is making that run to tie the game and we get caught up in the action as a long three-point shot is sunk here, then a slashing drive to the basket there, and with seconds to go the rebound is secured, and the player streaks downcourt and finishes with a thunderous slam-dunk to win the game at the buzzer. We are created as emotional people — and to exclude emotion from our faith life, our worship life, our Jesus life is ridiculous.

I am not a big fan of revival meetings (and yes, that could be interpreted

to mean that I am a little fond of them). I recall back in Rochester, New York, maybe in 1977 or 78, there was going to be a major revival event at one of the bigger sports venues in town. Advertisements were posted all over town, with their slogan *“I Found It.”* The sizable Jewish community in the city ran an ad campaign of their own; it read, *“We Never Lost It.”* I could go on for hours about what was wrong with that first slogan. Relax. I’m not going to. I think that events like that give revival a bad name.

We do need to have our faith sparked, energized, fed, rejuvenated, aroused, motivated, animated . . . need more? No. You get it. Sometimes we seem to function as if the Holy Spirit has never really touched us, much less taken control. Remembering our Baptisms position us for more, and perhaps deeper, encounters with the Holy Spirit.

I cannot end this sermon without some reference to today’s First Lesson (well, I could, but I’m not going to).

This text is one that I have been using at every ordination and installation of a Pastor where I have been invited to share. There is usually a point in the liturgy where fellow-clergy come forward to lay hands on the newly ordained or installed Pastor, speak a blessing, and read a passage of Scripture. I picked this one about thirty years ago, and I usually precede it with these words of “my wisdom”: *“When you come to that point where you just want to pack it all in . . . and you will . . . when you start asking the question ‘Why did God ever bring me to this place?’ . . . and you will . . . when you are absolutely convinced that you’re getting nowhere . . . and there are plenty of others around to confirm that assessment, consider these words from Isaiah: **“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior . . .”***

Pastors are not the only ones who feel isolated, frustrated, and dejected — all of us go through such periods. For some of us, those are short-lived and infrequent; for others of us, that seems almost to define our lives. In

either case, that message: ***“I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior . . .”*** is the one we need to hear and hear again. It’s not up to you . . . it’s not going to be handled by you . . . you don’t have the resources, power, or intellect to get through . . . you never did; you never will . . . so lean into Him, and let Him take you through all that.

How? How do we lean into Him. How do we know the waters, rivers, and fire will not have their way with us? Here’s the foundation of that promise: ***“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”***

That’s your Baptism! Redeemed . . . summoned by name . . . mine! That’s you! So listen to Him . . . just be quiet and listen . . . don’t ask . . . don’t whine . . . don’t complain or kvetch . . . don’t try to explain . . . don’t interrupt . . . just listen: ***“I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”***

Amen.