

January 12, 2020

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen

We, in the Lutheran church celebrate two sacraments: the Eucharist or Holy Communion and Baptism.

At one time Luther thought that there should be three sacraments; the third being penance. But after much thought and deliberation he came to understand that penance is part and parcel of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

We believe that there are three things necessary for something to be a sacrament: namely – a command from God, a common element and God's promise of forgiveness.

And today of course we celebrate the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. When you visit Israel you can go to the place along the river Jordan where it is thought Jesus might have been baptized. It is an interesting tourist stop. The Jordan River is hardly a river by our definition. It is not as wide as some large creeks in Lancaster County. Yet, that spot of earth allows us to picture Jesus in the water standing next to John as water is used for a ritual cleansing after which God descends like a dove and speaks these words: "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And as Jesus leaves this scene he begins his public ministry. This is a defining moment in Jesus' life. He has received God's blessing and empowerment to begin his earthly mission.

I'm certain most of us here today were baptized as infants or small children. Most of us don't remember being baptized. But then we don't need to remember, we just have to appreciate the fact that we were baptized, that we received the gift of the Holy Spirit, that we are God's adopted daughters and sons, that we are part of Christ's church, and that we, too, have a mission on earth – albeit a mission that may change as we grow and mature.

At confirmation Camp I was part of the team that taught on the subject of baptism. To begin the study we went around the room and asked each student who baptized them. They all gave the name of the pastor at the church where they were baptized, if they knew or remembered his or her name.

And then we told them they were all wrong. The most correct answer is that we are baptized by God with the water and the word. For us a pastor is usually leading the service of baptism but he or she is not the one who baptizes. It is God's doing. And that is an important facet of baptism that we hang our hat on – that we hold tightly to. Some denominations allow for rebaptism. And some demand it if you come to that denomination that does not baptize infants, but rather baptizes when a person comes to Christ at an age of accountability.

I've always wondered in those instances if God didn't do it right the first time. And what if he doesn't do it right the second time?

I was born and raised a Lutheran in Montour County PA. After serving in the Army as an anesthetist, my wife and young daughter moved to Nashville, TN. At this time we weren't attending church on a regular basis. Our next door neighbors invited us to go with them to their church – a Southern Baptist church.

We went with them. It was a new and different experience for us, but we really liked the people we met and we began to get involved with the congregation. I taught Sunday School – giving them the only theological view I knew, which was Lutheran. They didn't complain or call me out on it. Eventually we decided that we wanted to officially become part of that church.

Well, in order to do so, we, my wife and I, needed to be re-baptized. Barb and I gave that serious consideration and came to believe that if we must do that in order to be part of that fellowship we would, but believing in our heart of hearts that it was not necessary. We believed in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

Long story short, we were re-baptized. And on that occasion you could say a few words having been baptized. So I did. I basically said that I believed in one baptism and that I was re-baptized as a way of continuing to be a member of that fellowship. And no one even commented on that.

Well not too long after we actually moved to Murfreesboro, TN and joined Advent Lutheran Church where our pastor for many years had grown up a Southern Baptist until he saw the light, converted to Lutheranism and became an incredible pastor.

As I look back on that experience with the Southern Baptist congregation I came to a deeper understanding of what my baptism was all about. It was about God and not about me. I came to appreciate that God did it right the first time, there is no need to be re-baptized. Period.

I've never taken my baptism for granted. I'm also hoping that you have never taken your baptism for granted.

It is a wonderful gift of God through water and his word. It is a life-long gift that enables us, empowers us, to be faithful to our calling, actually our callings in this life.

Just as at Jesus' baptism where God said – This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased – at the time of our baptism he says to each of us – This is my son, this is my daughter, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.

We may remember that following his baptism Jesus went to the wilderness where he was tempted by the evil one. And in the end Jesus was steadfast and faithful. Jesus was victorious over the temptations thrown at him.

Life is like that for us too, isn't it? We, the baptized, the ones sent out to be today's disciples are tempted and tested in many and various ways. Some are painful, hurtful. Some can have dire consequences. Yet our God remains with us through his Spirit to guide us through each day with all that each day holds. God continues to empower us as he did Jesus.

Baptism for Jesus was the starting point of his ministry. And so it is for us. While we don't remember a thing about it, it is a fact. We are the baptized community of God.

You and I are now the ones who rely on the Spirit of God within to accomplish the ministry that is set before us. On our own, we wouldn't be able to make it work. I am impressed with this congregation, Emmanuel. I see a relatively few dedicated members giving everything you have to make this a house of worship and service that is looking with joy to calling a new pastor, a new shepherd. And with that new pastor, as well as in the meantime, you all step up and give of yourselves in so many ways, it's hard for me to count them all.

Each act, each thing you do, is part of your calling today here at Emmanuel. I know there are other congregations who find themselves in similar situations and do not have the sense of unity and family that shines forth here.

Your sense of being part of the larger community is also an example of your calling within the neighborhood and beyond.

And I sense that for each of you involved here, this is not primarily about you – it is about God. It is about what you believe God is calling you to do at this moment in time. This is putting your baptismal faith to practice day after day, year after year. This is living out your call by God today.

Some congregations have a baptismal font filled with water at the entrance to the sanctuary so that those who enter may dip a finger in the water and make the sign of the cross. In doing so, we are reminding ourselves of whose we are. We are reminding ourselves that we are indeed baptized by God to fulfill the mission he gives us each day.

Luther is quoted as saying that each day as we arise we should make the sign of the cross, remembering our baptism.

While we believe in one baptism, we daily celebrate our baptism and understand that all we do in God's name is made possible because God loves us and has given us the gift of himself – the gift of the Holy Spirit – at baptism. Let us ever rejoice in that gift. Thanks be to God. Amen