Sermon Baptism of our Lord 2023
January 15, 2023
Matthew 3:13-17; Romans 6:1-11

In the Name T of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, that Name placed upon you at your new birth in the waters of Holy Baptism.

I was listening to a presentation on Leviticus this week, and the presenter was talking about how Leviticus is the book that people usually wrestle with the most when it comes to reading the Bible. If you’ve ever tried reading it, you probably understand. And because of that people feel it’s inapplicable. And that’s understandable to an extent because the laws that are laid out in Leviticus give instruction as to how the Israelites were to live. But as you look at that, there’s this overarching theme of cleanness and purity. The issue was that if you wanted to come into the presence of God, you had to come in a way that was clean.

The presenter’s point is that this concept is not lost on us in our day—now it may be a bit with regard to our standing before God and we’ll talk a bit more about that component in a minute—but with regard to life cleanness is not overlooked. First of all, he talked about the focus of the ecological movement. He said that if you look at how many people worship today it’s connected to the earth in some way, and what is the language we talk about with regard to the earth? Cleanness and pollution. You don’t want to put pollutants into the air. You want to use clean fuels, you want to use clean products, you want to use items sourced in a clean fashion. In other words, the language is very much in our purview.

Then, he noted that we see this with our bodies too. You don’t want to be contaminated by unclean things. This can relate to what you eat and drink. But all the more he made the connection to germ theory. You don’t want to be unclean because of the germs that have attached to your body and attack you. And I think we can relate to that even more so because of the last three years. We had two years where we had the significant concern of COVID, and this winter, we’ve added to that the resurgence of the flu and other things like RSV.

In other words, as we see this perspective of clean and unclean, we understand that it’s still with us. It’s not necessarily framed in the same way as the Old Testament, but it’s still a concept that affects how we think. That said, what’s my point in this for today’s lesson on Jesus’ baptism?

Well, as we can relate to this concept, we can relate to washing. We especially have in mind to wash ourselves. In fact, I would expect most of you probably bathe daily or close to it. In our society, that’s the expectation. We’re going to keep ourselves clean by bathing daily. If we don’t, we don’t feel quite right. Well, in the Old Testament, we can relate because when the people came in contact with something that was considered unclean, then they washed. This washing was commanded if one came in contact with something dead. This washing was commanded when a woman finished her menstruation. This washing was commanded as the High Priest would enter the Temple. Interestingly, it was also commanded when he came back out of the temple.

So what is this? This is that purity before God I was talking about. Just as we understand that the body has certain elements that we desire to be clean, the Old Testament made the connection that when it comes to standing before God there was a need also to be cleansed. But, what do we do with this? Does this mean we have to be washing before we come to Church? No, that is an Old Testament instruction and so we don’t still have to observe it. But we don’t want to be too quick to just cast aside Old Testament instruction. It’s easy to ignore it and think it doesn’t have anything to do with us, but then it’s easy to forget that this is the same God and He gave that instruction for a reason.

No, instead we can understand that this relates to us and our sin. We aren’t excluded from God’s presence anymore because we touch something dead. No, but we are because the stench of the death that our sin brings is unbearable to the good and holy God. And so we begin to learn what it means for us.

And as we look at the context of Jesus’ baptism we see the context for John the Baptist’s work as well. We see that as John was baptizing, He is making this shift from Old to New, and He is pointing people to be baptized in view of that. Think about what his baptism is called. It’s a baptism for repentance and the forgiveness of what? Sin.

And of course that’s what makes John balk at baptizing Jesus, isn’t it? He’s there baptizing for the forgiveness of sins, for the washing away of the impurity that prevents one from standing before God, and here comes the One who is clean ,who is the perfect God, pure in the flesh, and John recognizes that the roles should be switched. John knows he’s still a sinner and that Jesus should take the wheel and do the baptizing. But Jesus refuses. Why? “**But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’**”

But what does that mean? What does this mean to “fulfill all righteousness?” Well, Jesus kept the Law perfectly for us, is this to fulfill some kind of command in the Law? Nope. There’s no Old Testament demand for baptism as such. Yes, there were those ablutions, those washings I mentioned to make someone ritually clean, but not baptism as such. So if it’s not a command how does it fulfill all righteousness? Well, simply, it needs to be done because of Jesus’ own call to baptize and because of the connection between baptism and His death for us. As I say that, the commentary I read made the point more specifically by saying that Jesus had to do this to fulfill all righteousness because He had to be aligned, to be numbered with sinners, so that He could take their punishment of sin upon Himself on the cross. Likewise, He had to be baptized in order to make baptism holy.

In other words, as Jesus is baptized He is being numbered among sinners to die for their sins, but at the same time He had make baptism something so that your baptism would be something. As we say in the prayer for baptisms: “*Through the Baptism in the Jordan of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, You sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood and washing away of sin.*” Jesus was baptized to make the water in that font holy for whoever is baptized there. Jesus was baptized to make the water holy for you so that when you were baptized it’s holiness washed away the unholiness of your sin and gave you the holiness of God.

In fact, Luther even understood that what happened was that Jesus took on your sin, took on the sin of all humanity, at His baptism so that He could carry it to the cross. In that you see both of these ideas together: Jesus identified with sinners, even taking on their sin there, and Jesus making the water holy by His holiness to give that to those who are baptized. A beautiful image of that exchange.

But from there, I think we should finally apply this to today, to you as a Christian. To ask that good Lutheran question, “What does this mean?” In other words, what is your baptism? We can see it so clearly in that passage from Romans 6: “**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.**” So what is this? It’s your death. Or better yet it’s the death of your sin, it’s the death of your death. You as a sinner have died. Your sin has been crucified with Jesus. But you also have been raised with Him. His resurrection is your resurrection.

And Christians, take time to look at this passage. Go home and read it again. Make that your homework for this week. Really reflect on what Paul says here. Because it’s twofold. This is the promise that since Jesus’ body actually came forth out of the grave that first Easter and ascended into heaven, as the head of the Church He will come for you all as the Church. He will come for you and raise you; raise your particular body at the end of time. That’s the promise. You are marked by His blood, raised to holiness in Him. And that’s your hope for all things. No matter the suffering and the sadness now, on that day He will raise you and give you eternal life in His Kingdom, living with Him face to face. Christians, there is no more glorious thought!

But that’s not all! You are raised even now in His resurrection. You walk in newness of life even now. Before His work in you, your good works were filthy rags. Now, they still don’t earn you heaven—that’s what you have by His death and resurrection; you don’t go to heaven because you’re a good person. But now, He has given you His goodness so that you actually do things that are good and pleasing to God. You still have your sin. You still wrestle with it. In fact, you likely don’t even feel like your good works now are good. And that’s good because it shows that you have to trust in Him and not in yourself. But this is the reality for you.

Last week I made that point that we need to think about the priority that the Word of God needs to be in our life. This is a continuation of that. You need to live knowing that you are His. You need to live knowing that the sinful things you are tempted to do by that sinner that you still are, that those are no longer you as you are also a Christian. You are simultaneously sinner and saint, but that saint is real and is your identity before God. That truth and promise determines your reality now. Think of it that way. Think of yourself that way when you interact with others, when you pray, when you go about your day to day life; even as you watch TV and read books and surf the internet. Think about who you are and whose you are as a baptized child of God.

And to tie back to the beginning of this sermon, think about what that means for cleanness. Yes we have all sorts of conversations about cleanness, but understand that your cleanness and purity comes from this font. It comes from this Word spoken to you, it comes from this meal. It doesn’t come from the things of this world. Sure, daily showers are good, and I think we can all appreciate them. Eating healthy food is good, and we can appreciate that. Taking care of the gift that the earth is is good and we can appreciate that. But when it comes to your holiness and purity it does not come from what is around you or what goes into your body. It comes from the Word of God which makes you holy with the holiness of Christ for you. Thanks be to God. Amen.