

## “The Mystery of Baptism”

*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.*

*Acts 2:28,29*

For this week’s baptisms and last week’s confirmations we’ve heard a lot of serious vows. Some overlap. Today you heard me ask, “Do you wish to be baptized?” Do you believe in Jesus Christ? How about the Virgin Mary? How about Jesus descending into hell? How about the promise of heaven? Do you believe?

The answers are no child’s play but change who we are and how we live our lives. So some might be saying “That might be all right for those making vows last week because they were both over the age of 18” and have had time to explore and decide but here we have children. And they for the most part had to have their lines read by their parents. And even if some could follow along with words, could they understand their meaning? These are great mysteries! Heaven. Hell. The Virgin Birth. Could they understand the implications of such beliefs? Especially in times of persecution it means death? Or even in our present time and place where secular humanism is the prevailing ideology such profession of faith means derision, ridicule and challenge?

There are some out there who say, “I’m 40 years old or 70 years old or 85 years old” and I’m not sure that I fully grasp it. Yet we encourage young children, and even infants as young as a few days have such vows of faith made for them?

To the ones honest enough to say, I’m not sure if even I, as old as I am, fully grasp it I say “My point exactly!” When we deal with the things of God, the mysterious Triune God who we confess is Uncreated, Infinite, and Eternal we can soar as high as St. John the Theologian in expression yet still reach for more. No one can wait till he completely comprehends because that day, even though you were to live a thousand years, would never come. We can do no more than scratch the surface concerning the mystery of creation, the mystery of sin and salvation.

Human beings cannot ascend to God and the thoughts of God. Instead, we teach that God comes to us by his free grace and favour. What does our text say today? “*For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom **the Lord our God calls to himself***”. Only God can bring us to himself. We cannot go to him.

Therefore we do not call this event an ordinance but rather a sacrament because the emphasis of this event is not on what we do or what laws we obey in coming or bringing our infants and children to baptism but rather it is a mystery of what God does in coming to us. The word sacrament is a Latin translation of the word mystery. The emphasis today in celebrating the Sacrament or Mystery of Baptism is on the actions of Almighty God.

It is a mystery of how and why our Holy God would come to us poor sinners and grant us forgiveness, life and salvation.

And yes we are poor sinners desperately in need of forgiveness. The secular humanism of our age says we are born innocent. The humanists of our age are wolves in sheep's clothing exalting the nature of man.

But the truth – the painful truth is that our merciful Father wishes to give us his grace and forgiveness because we are desperately in need of it. *“Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins”* is what our text says. There is a need for the promise of forgiveness proclaimed in our sermon text today. There is need of repentance. There is a need for a cure for our sins. The need for a cure was known already back in the garden of Eden. But so also was there also the Promise.

Our first parents Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit and in their sin, experienced the fear of God. “They hid themselves from the presence of God among the trees in the garden”. But nevertheless God pursued them and proclaimed the first Gospel message in Genesis 3:16. He told the serpent who is the devil:

I will put enmity between you and the woman  
 And between your offspring and her offspring  
 He shall crush your head,  
 And you shall bruise his heal.

The offspring would be Jesus, the Saviour and Messiah.

The sins of our first parents became ours unfortunately even at the moment of conception as King David laments in Psalm 51:

In sin did my mother conceive me.

And so from conception and birth the solution and cure for sin needs to be found. Thanks be to God the cure comes through Jesus Christ and his righteousness bestowed through baptism. We are clothed in His righteousness as symbolized by the white robes of baptism. I ask you, who else has lived the kind of holy life of our Lord? Who else is like him, truly God and truly Man. And to think that he would be the atoning sacrifice for us? You can go all over the world and see people offering up sacrifice – yes, even in the modern world. Candles before Buddah. Food sacrifices before Vishnu.<sup>i</sup> These are perpetual sacrifices because it's never enough. But the sacrifice of the Messiah who is true God and true Man it was enough. It is the Promise for you and your children.

And to those who cry foul concerning original sin. It is not fair. We must realize that there is much more which “is not fair”. A mother sins and abuses drugs. Her child had no choice in the matter. He is born with an addiction. A mother sins and drinks to excess during pregnancy.

Her child had no choice in the matter. He is born with fetal alcohol syndrome. But thanks be to God. Some cures are also given through no choice of our own. In the physical realm, medical doctors might do much to alleviate some symptoms. In the spiritual realm, guardians who might adopt the child can bring him to the healing waters of baptism and save his soul.

We do so much for our children without their express consent. We give them inoculations against childhood disease like smallpox and polio. We do it and even legislate it. No one questions that. We do not let all matters of life and death boil down to a decision, consent, and understanding. Why then should we let all matters of eternal life and death boil down to a decision, consent and understanding? The logic of those against infant baptism is faulty.

Why not inoculate against the consequences of our sin? The greatest medicine is the blood of Christ. It is blood applied in baptism for “the washing of regeneration”. It is blood partaken of at the Lord’s Supper. It is the “medicine of immortality”.

And yet it does more than inoculate against sin. It bestows gifts of eternal life and salvation. It is the gift of faith. Yes, infants and small children can have faith. We have many innate gifts at birth. We can learn language just by listening and nobody teaches us such things. Why not have some inborn gifts at our second birth which is baptism? That is the gift of faith. Can even the littliest ones have faith? God’s Words says that they can. “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, let he wish that he was never born is what our Lord is saying.

It is a gift that comes through the power of Almighty God.

How indeed does everything depends on Almighty God! We dare not limit the Grace of God. He comes as the Word Incarnate. He still comes as the Word connected to the Water which is Baptism. He still comes as the Word connected to Bread and Wine whereby we also receive His true body and blood. He still comes as the Word of God is proclaimed. These are His means of grace. It might be possible for Him to come through other means or even directly but these means “Word and Sacrament” are special because he has revealed to us in His word specifically and with promise that he comes by these means.

And for young children and infants especially, who cannot understand the Word, or are not old enough to examine themselves before partaking of the Lord’s Supper, we rejoice in the fact that God still wishes to bestow his grace and favour on the smallest of the Kingdom. No one is excluded from God’s grace. His ability to communicate with us is not dependent on our abilities with language. It is not dependent on our IQ. Through baptism, God’s presence can penetrate through all human weaknesses due to age or disability to reach the soul he makes precious through the shed blood of Jesus.

Our text declares, “The promise is for you and for your children”. It has always been so. In Old Testament times children were made part of the covenant through circumcision. Everyone knows that only boys were subjected to the procedure but girls participated in its benefits also

by virtue of the saying spoken of by God to Abraham (Genesis 17:7) "I will be the God of your descendants, and circumcision shall be a covenant.

Our merciful Father wishes to give us his grace and forgiveness even as we are but days old if we are brought to him as the children were brought to Jesus in Mark 10. Jesus said "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the Kingdom of Heaven was meant for such as these".

From the mystery of sin we enter the mystery of salvation through Word and Sacrament. From the mystery of salvation we enter into the mystery of eternal life. It is something for all God's children whether very young or old. Truly we have something to celebrate. It is a life ever new from the Almighty who continually reveals something new. It is every tear wiped away from our eyes. It is a place where we run but never grow weary. It is a place of wonders beyond the ability of even the man with the greatest vocabulary and earthly experience to describe. Even if you knew the 20 volumes of the largest Oxford English dictionary and added in a dozen other languages as well, ancient and modern you still could not adequately describe the fullness of the gift.

May we rejoice in God's gifts today. For God comes to us in Holy Baptism. We are all dependent on his coming to us whether we are young or old. How desperate are we for his coming for we are lost sinners. Thanks be to God that it doesn't boil down to our intelligence or IQ or age. When he comes through water and the Word there is the mystery of salvation. There is all the more reason to rejoice in receiving God's gifts as we realize that it is a matter of life and death. Amen.

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