

January 08, 2023

Matthew 3:13-17

“A Wonderful Exchange!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the 1700s, numerous doctors proposed what was known as “the water cure” for every ailment known to humanity. The water cure sometimes meant simple bathing. But sometimes it included a special trip to a particular spring or the drinking of enormous quantities of natural mineral water. By 1900, the water cure fad had ended. But, thankfully, it left behind one feature of the movement with enduring health benefits: daily washing with soap and water (*To All Eternity*, page 84).

In the water and words of Baptism, God offers us a profound and powerful cure. Just as simple soap and water combine to create a powerful defense against disease, the water and the Word of Baptism combine for our spiritual benefit and defense. As it says in *Luther’s Small Catechism*, “It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare ... Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Mark (16:16): ‘Whoever believes and baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.’”

We are told in our gospel lesson for this morning that at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry even he was baptized in the Jordan river. This is a curious thing. Jesus is the perfect Son of God and baptism is for those who are imperfect sinners. In fact, John the Baptist points this out. He says to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” In other words, John is saying, “I am the sinful one who needs to be cleansed from sin. Why are you to be cleansed when you are holy and perfect?” Jesus explains to John, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

Jesus’ baptism was to identify him with the world of sinners - with you and me. Paul describes this beautifully in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” **A Wonderful Exchange!** Jesus’ baptism, and the words of the Father, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” and the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him, publicly identified Jesus as the Lamb of God who had come to take away the sin of the world - our sin. In this way, Jesus prepared Baptism for you and me, and for all who would follow him to the end of the age. What does that mean for us?

Jesus’ baptism is the source of our baptism. Why? Jesus’ baptism at the Jordan was a public declaration that he was already living as sin for us and that this was why he came into the world. It was a public declaration of his ultimate baptism on the cross, where he would finish what was publicly declared at the Jordan. Long after his baptism in the Jordan river our Lord and Savior says in the gospel of St. Luke: “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how pressed I am till it be completed (12:50)!” Jesus knew that his baptism at the Jordan ultimately meant the cross. And, as I said a moment ago, Jesus’ baptism is the source of ours. This is a very important point. Kurt Marquart writes:

For us the cross means quite the opposite of what it meant for our Lord: death for Him but life for us. On the cross He is the Testator. We are the beneficiaries. His holy life and death provide the “input.” The “output” of full and free salvation comes to us ... We may think of our Lord’s baptism as a great tide that washes the world’s sins onto Him and sweeps Him

(and them) to the cross. It is precisely at His baptism, therefore, that Jesus stands revealed as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). *From* the cross, however, flows to us the saving tide of our baptisms (1 Pt. 3:20-21!), full of God’s mercy, forgiveness, and life (*The Saving Truth*, Vol. 1, page 89).

A Wonderful Exchange! If you have been baptized, then rejoice in the washing away of sin that has been given to you by water and the Word. Remember and celebrate your Baptism by returning to the words of your Baptism every day: “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This is a life giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit. As it says in Titus 3:5-8,

... he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the *washing* of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, *whom he poured out on us richly* through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

By Jesus’ command, and when combined with the words, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” ordinary water becomes a washing away of all sin. Not only that, but the name of the only God who saves us bestows on us a new identity. We are justified and heirs who anticipate the inheritance of eternal life. Moreover, baptism is a seal or a guarantee of authenticity, that is to say, it causes us to trust that what has been given is real. And finally, it motives us to daily live in good works. Baptism is lived every day when we die to sin by saying “no” to what is wrong, while being raised to live a new life in the righteousness of Jesus.

Luther expresses this understanding when he wrote his baptismal prayer in his orders of Baptism from 1523 and from 1526. The whole prayer is in our Lutheran Service Book, but here’s a goodly portion of it:

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 a lavish washing away of sin. We pray that You would behold (name) according to Your boundless mercy and bless him with true faith by the Holy Spirit that through this saving flood all sin in him which has been inherited from Adam and which he himself has committed since would be drowned and die. Grant that he be kept safe and secure in the holy ark of the Christian Church, being separated from the multitude of unbelievers and serving Your name at all times with a fervent spirit and a joyful hope, so that, with all believers in Your promise, he would be declared worthy of eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord (*LSB*, page 269).

In our gospel lesson, after the Baptism of our Lord Jesus, we read: “... and behold, the heavens were opened ...” This brings to mind our first parents and the tragic fall into sin. In the beginning they lived in

paradise. You will recall that, after sin ruined everything, God drove them and all future generations out of paradise and He stationed cherubim with flaming swords at the entrance to keep everyone out. Because of sin, no one deserves anything from God. But at the birth of Jesus we see angels *from heaven* announcing good news to the shepherds. What had been closed is reopening. The baby born in Bethlehem would reconcile God with humanity. "Glory to God in the Highest!" And now, as we read about the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, the baby has grown up and is doing the work he was born to do. He opens heaven to sinners on account of becoming sin for us. What was closed to sinners has been reopened.

It can't get much more exciting than that. Heaven is not far away. What was closed because of sin is now opened because Jesus was baptized. No longer do we hear about cherubim and swords flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. Instead, we see the one in the water who is baptized with our death that will take him to a tree of death that he might be a washing away of our sin and a fruit prepared for us to eat unto everlasting life. "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved," Jesus says. He takes sin and death. He gives forgiveness and forever life. **A Wonderful Exchange!** I leave you with the words of Luther:

That is the mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ's and the righteousness of Christ not Christ's but ours. He has emptied himself of his righteousness that he might clothe us with it and fill us with it. And he had taken our evils upon himself that he might deliver us from them ... In the same manner he grieved and suffered in our sins and was confounded, and in the same manner we rejoice and glory in his righteousness (Martin Luther, Werke [Weimar, 1883], 5:608).

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott