

Wednesday in Oculi, 2006  
Text: John 3:1-8 (Holy Baptism)  
Trinity Lutheran, Worden, IL & Zion Lutheran, Carpenter, IL  
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✠Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ ✠

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You know the feeling. You've been working on a project – whether building a fence, or sewing a dress, or baking a cake, or writing a paper, or anything at all – you've been working at it a while and you discover a mistake you've made. At first you try to fix it. To work around it. To find a way to make the mistake alright and still keep the other work you've done. But then there comes that moment when you realize that it's a lost cause. The mistake is too drastic, too basic, too fundamental to allow the rest to be salvaged. It's time to tear down and throw away what you've been working on and start over.

So it is with us and Holy Baptism. The problem with humanity, with you and me and all people, is not a problem that can be nuanced and worked around. The problem with us is basic and fundamental. We are "by nature sinful and unclean." We are by nature, from our very conception, turned in on ourselves and twisted away from God and what he wants. We are without true love of God and fear of God, and with a broken will that always leans against what God wants. Scripture calls all this brokenness sin and there is no escaping it by our own power. Since we are so flawed by nature down to the very core, we cannot make use of ourselves in making ourselves better. The defective blanket or the crooked fence won't mend itself. Someone else must come from the outside and tear up the seam or tear down the fence and start over. We need something more radical than a repairman or a doctor who can fix the few things that went wrong, we need someone who can take the fullness of our wrongness and make it all right.

And thus does God come at us not with a list of self-improvement items, but with Holy Baptism. If our spiritual life was as easy as simply knowing a list of things to do, then there would be no reason for Jesus to suffer and die on the cross for us. If salvation came by works of the Law, then Christ died for nothing. But as we saw a few weeks ago, the Law is there to show us our sin. The Ten Commandments are not ten easy steps to better living – rather they are the pillars of righteousness which we can never uphold by our own strength. The Law shows us that we have no hope of attaining perfection by our own merits. We are broken and need someone to fix it.

So Jesus came and did just that. He took up all our sinfulness onto his own shoulders and carried it to the cross where all the punishment for that sin was poured out upon him. Thus did Jesus die the death our sins earned. But he didn't stay dead for he then rose again from the dead proving that the Father accepted his sacrifice (indeed, that he planned it before the foundation of the world). Thus Jesus' death and resurrection change everything. From Jesus on all things are new.

But how does his death and resurrection get to me? How can I be made new? Jesus gives Nicodemus the answer in our text for this evening: You must be born again of water and the Spirit. We need a new start – a new birth, this time not flesh to flesh but Spirit to spirit. This is Holy Baptism: a washing of rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit. Here the Old Adam in us is drowned and put to death, just as Pharaoh's army was drowned in the Red Sea and the whole world consumed in the waters of Noah's flood. God was doing all these things in the Old Testament with water to point forward to your dying in Holy Baptism. For Baptism is truly your death – it's being united to Christ's life-giving death as St. Paul says in Romans 6, that we were buried with Christ in his death through baptism. And thus Baptism is also our life.

Just as Israel was saved through the same waters that brought Pharaoh's men death, just as Noah and his family were saved on the waters that killed the whole world, so also you are saved through the waters of Holy Baptism which bring death to your old Adam, your old sinful fleshy nature. For not only were you buried with Christ in baptism, but you were also raised up out of baptismal waters into the resurrection of Christ.

Thus Holy Baptism unites you with Christ, gives you new birth, regenerates your spirit, delivers the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation to you personally. For in Holy Baptism, the Lord God stamps his very name on you (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and makes you his own. Thus Holy Baptism is truly a miracle which God performs, not the work of men. It is God's command and promise which he attaches to the water which does these things. Thus it is quite fitting that this gift be given to children who are actually the best equipped to receive it. For unlike grown adults, infants are not too proud to simply receive a gift. For that is what Baptism is: the gift of eternal life worked by God through his word connected with the water bringing salvation to soul and body.

Thus Baptism brings life. But with this life in Christ, Holy Baptism brings a struggle. For while Baptism renews us and forgives us, still on this side of glory we struggle with the flesh, that Old Adam hung round our necks. Thus we must daily

strive against the Old Adam. How is thus done? Again, not with a list of self-help items, for the power is not ours to fight our old fleshy selves. Rather the power is in God and his gifts. Thus we must return to our baptism in contrition and repentance and drown that old Adam daily by living a life of repentance. As we shall see next week, private confession and absolution is the great return to Baptism that helps keeps our entire lives focused on repentance. But even now this evening we receive strength for the baptized life as we come forward to receive with our baptized bodies the very body and blood of Jesus. For Jesus is our life from start to finish. He gives us new birth in Baptism and he sustains that life with his body and blood. Let us hasten to receive him again.

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Now the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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