

First Sunday after Epiphany; The Baptism of Our Lord; January 12, 2025

Titus 3:4-7

The Why, How, and for What of God's Salvation

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, he saved us – not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life.

There's a lot to be said for brevity. I recently heard a Lutheran professor say, "I judge the efficacy of a sermon by its brevity." Another wise proverb claims that no soul has ever been saved past ten minutes. Keep the message short. Keep it sweet. Keep it to the point. People love that.

If you agree with these thoughts, here is good news. Here comes the shortest sermon you'll ever hear! (Not mine, sorry!) St. Paul gives us a three-word sermon. He writes this, and he actually writes it twice! "He. Saved. Us." It's simple, right? It's such a beautiful, complete, to the point message. But before we say "Amen" and stand, should we let the apostle develop his thought just a bit? Or three bits? He'll answer three good questions about this three word sermon, "He Saved Us." Why did God save us? How did he save us? And, finally, what does it all mean – what's next?

"Why did God save us?" Do you remember why St. Paul came to faith? It was pretty dramatic. He was blinded by light, knocked to the ground, then there was this voice from heaven, "Saul, Saul!" And one might think that Paul would mention this story from time to time, but from my reading of all fourteen of his letters, he never does. Instead, when he talks about how he was saved, and how all of us are saved, he puts it like this. It's not, "When he knocked me to the ground he saved me." It's this: **But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared...**

Again, he makes it simple and keeps it sweet. When we think of believing in Jesus and coming to faith, it's so easy to overcomplicate the matter. Let Paul set us straight, Why did God save us? Two words: his mercy. God saved you because he is merciful; he delights in sparing the punishment that people deserve for their sin. Nothing good in us or done by us contributed to our salvation. We were all saved by the loving kindness and mercy of God and nothing else.

But, here's the problem. We might be able to wrap our heads around this simple truth but, inevitably we are tempted to believe the lie that is just as destructive as the first lie Adam and Eve believed in the Garden of Eden. The lie that maybe there is more. God being kind isn't enough to warrant my salvation. There must be more. Needs to be more. So, what happens? Well, I need to find whatever that "more" might be.

The Devil has two primary lies. These are the lies he goes to first. The first is this: "Your good works, your actions are what get you in good standing with God." And, if he can't get you with that one, he moves to: "Your actions keep you in good standing with God." We might think that

the last thing the Devil wants us to be concerned with is our goodness and godliness, but he loves it when we focus on our own goodness and kindness and love to save us, rather than the kindness and mercy that moved God to save us.

Paul says in mind-blowing verse 5: **he saved us, not by righteous works we did ourselves, but because of his mercy.** God doesn't save you because of the *righteous* things you have done, but because of the *unrighteous* things you have done. Isn't that backwards? No, that's mercy. It's why God saved you; God saw you at your conception, and he knew you were a mess. You were lost. You needed to be saved, and because *he* is kind, because *he* is merciful, *he* acted. And here is what happened: **...the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared.**

That's Christmas. Jesus appeared! God stepped into the world. He took on that human flesh. In today's Gospel we see him, Jesus, anointed – set apart and designated at his own baptism – to be that Savior, our Savior. Jesus is the center of God's mercy. Jesus is the one who went to the cross to pay for all our unrighteousness. Jesus then is *how* God saved us and all sinners. But looking at the last half of verse five, we see how God attaches us to that saving work of Christ and saves each one of us personally: **He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit.**

“The washing” is a physical application of water, baptism. “Rebirth and renewal” tells us the effect that the washing of baptism has. The water itself is not special, nor is the man applying it. But here we have God's promise that in this physical washing the Holy Spirit is at work to give us new birth and new life through faith in Christ. It's really a miracle. It's this promise of the Spirit's work of faith in baptism that enables St. Peter to say: **baptism now saves you also.** But now how does that work, because didn't we just get done saying that Jesus' saving work saves us? So, how does God save us? Through Jesus or through baptism? The answer is: yes!

I heard another pastor use this illustration once. If you have a cell phone, how does it have power? What keeps that phone alive and working? Does the power to keep it alive come through the outlet that you plug into or from the cord? It's both, right? You can't directly insert your phone into an outlet to charge it, and, likewise, if you just have a cord dangling from your phone and no source of power to plug into, your phone's going to stay dead. And, I think this helps to explain Jesus, baptism, and us.

Jesus is the only way to be saved. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Faith in Jesus is how God saves us. But how do you come to Jesus? One way is through the Word, another through the Lord's Supper, and the third is by your baptism. Baptism you might say is the cord that connects us to the power source, and in this way it is perfectly true to say that baptism saves you. Through it the Spirit connects you to the new birth and new life that comes through Christ.

So, we have the why and how. The last little expansion Paul makes on his three word sermon, “He save us,” is to answer: for what? So, what's next? Here is the beauty of what's next: you already know it. It's there in verse 7: **having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life.** That's what's next: life eternal, but, we're not there yet,

and the road to that life we confidently hope for isn't always an easy one. We are heirs, and we know the inheritance is ours now. It's waiting for us, stored up securely in heaven. But for now, we do not see it with our eyes, and we cannot lay our hands to it. And while we are waiting to see it and touch it, to experience it fully, there are going to be moments when we look nothing like a child of God. There are going to be times when you feel less than saved. There are going to be experiences in this life that make you doubt and forget your status as God's child, his heir. So, what will you do in those moments?

Here is what I hope. I hope in those moments you remember water dripping, trickling, pouring out over you as God's triune name was spoken. And, whether that happened when you were a baby or sometime later, I hope you know what that very visible sign means: God saved you, and he's never left you, and he won't. And that water is the proof. This act of washing is God's visible promise to you that his mercy is for you, that his Son, Jesus is for you, and that you are his heir. Heaven is yours.

You see, it's true that your baptism happened once, and as long as you were baptized into the Triune God, you don't ever need to be baptized again. It is a one-time event. But that one-time event stretches forward through every moment of your life. It is for you to return to every day, again and again. Baptism's water is for you to live in constantly, to return to in the same repentant faith God gave you there. Rest in those waters always and marvel that this is how God saved you. Until your hope is fulfilled and your inheritance is in hand, his work in that water is proof that it's yours. Amen.