

“The story of our Baptism” Mark 1:4-11

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today we have for our meditation one of these really significant events in Jesus' life, which is recorded in all four [!] gospel accounts. Jesus' baptism. Where Jesus was baptized by John, where the Father spoke from heaven: “This is my beloved Son!” And where the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in a visible form.

However, this is not something that is only important for Jesus. This is about something profoundly significant for us as well. This is about one of the greatest gifts of our heavenly Father. Actually, calling Baptism a gift obscures what our Baptism is about. It is not just one gift, it is a cluster of divine, spiritual blessings and privileges that are freely given to anyone who is humble enough to receive this gracious offer of our God.

And because baptism is such a great deal, the adversary has worked hard to confuse people about what it is, what it does for us and how to receive it. What a mess he has made... Most of the time, and I would say that it applies to all of us, Christians just don't realize what a great thing it is, we don't appreciate it enough, we tend to neglect it.

Today I would like to do something different. I would like to share with you a story of Baptism. To talk about Baptism not so much as about the Church's ritual, not so much as about a doctrine, but to share with you a story of Baptism.

Perhaps, that may help us to see this precious gift in a new light and to grow once more in our appreciation of God's abundant grace. Let's do this! The story of our baptism is by no means a new story. It begins in the very beginning.

With the tragic revolution where our first parents were deceived to believe that we can fill the shoes of God the Creator: “You will be like gods!” Instead... sin, death and enmity has separated us from our loving Creator since.

If it was left to us, we wouldn't care about crossing this abyss, nor could we, even if by some miracle we desired it. It was our God, the eternal Son of God, the second person

of the Trinity, who already in the very beginning gave us that promise – “It will cost me greatly, my very life, but I will fix this!” This promise continues to remind us that our God has committed to restore what our foolish rebellion had broken.

Since that fatal event, we all are born and grow up ignorant and even hostile to our Creator, to whom we owe our very existence. It is Him, who since the very beginning searches for us, gently calls and invites us back into divine fellowship with Himself.

He calls us speaking to us through myriads of messengers that He sends out to the ends of the earth, today we call them simply – Christians. Sometimes He speaks through the circumstances in our lives, bringing us to realize that we are not in control of our lives.

On our own, according to our fallen nature we run from our God, we believe that the farther we are from the Father’s house, the more freedom and the more fun we will have in our lives, because we will be in charge. “You don’t need Him!”

This is one of the greatest lies that the adversary has planted in our hearts. So, we run away from the Triune God as fast as we can, until ... one day, His powerful voice catches us and stops us. If we listen to Him, our minds are gently changed and renewed. Like the scales of sinful foolishness fall from our eyes and we begin to see ourselves for who we are, and our God – for who He is.

We begin to realize that we have been fooled, that we have been kept in darkness, that we have been lied to, that we have been deceived about the very source of all the things that we so long for in our hearts.

God the Creator is the very source of everything good, yes! of life and light, of joy and fun, of beauty and wisdom, of meaning and significance, of purpose and security, and so on. “Come to me, let me embrace you, let me bless you!”

When we turn to Him, when the Holy Spirit renews our minds, we begin to see the truth. We begin to see ourselves for who we are – what we see is not something to be proud about. “I have sinned against you in my thoughts and in my words and in my actions, and I deserve your anger and punishment, here and in eternity.”

And that is where the wonderful surprise comes in. Contrary to what the adversary has told us, contrary to what the world generally thinks about the true God – He is not judgmental. While being the Ultimate Judge of all, He is the least judgmental of all.

As soon as we turn to Him, as soon as anyone turns to Him, what sort of attitude do we receive? What we justly deserve? No! There is no shaming, there is no trying to make us feel guilty and forever in His debt, no demands for reparation, none of this.

Like the father from the famous parable about the prodigal son from Luke 15, as soon as we turn to Him, He runs towards us, He not only throws His arms around you, He surrounds you, He indwell in you, He unites you with Himself.

“My dear child, you were lost, and now you are found. You were dead and now you are alive. While you were wandering oblivious of me, I was waiting for you and preparing a surprise for you. Come and let me show you!”

Get this! He has been waiting for you, planning how to cheer you up, how to surprise you with His gifts, and now He begins to pour them over you. What does He do? What are those gifts that He bestows upon us? This is what happens.

He makes you a new creation. He bestows to you a new identity. We are no longer only [!] His favourite creatures; He makes us His children. He puts His name on you and adopts you into His family. He becomes our Father and we – His sons and daughters.

“You are my own!” He gives you a new life, true life, eternal life, for the Spirit of life indwells in you, so that death of our physical bodies won’t be the end, it will only mean the transition into the Father’s nearer presence.

He gives you a new status. Glorious, divine, majestic status. You are one of His. You can call the most influential being – “My Father!” He gives you a new family. His family is now yours. All of it. Everyone who belongs to Jesus’ family are now your brothers and sisters. You are united with them by His own Spirit.

He gives you a new future, it is not anymore about this age only. We are heading to a new age, the age where we will be made like Jesus. Where we will inhabit the world without sin and death, without anything that hinders our happiness here.

And you will be indescribably powerful and beautiful and interesting. And He gives us a new heart. A heart of flesh, a living heart that desires what is good and perfect and holy. Which is in wonderful harmony with the desires of our Father in heaven.

He gives us His own Spirit; this is the bond that ties us with the Father and Jesus. This is the bond that ties all of us together. This is “the Spirit of the Lord ... the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” (Is 11:2)

See! Our Triune God showers us with His divine grace. Can we even remember and recount all these gifts?! How could we possibly understand and appreciate them all! And can you guess – how are these gifts given to you? Yes, in your Baptism. In your Baptism...

What we read happening with Jesus in His Baptism, happens in yours as well. The heavens are open, the Spirit descends on you, and the voice of the Father cheerfully proclaims: “Now you are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased!”

This is so big, so grand, so magnificent, our minds are too small to get it! But if we humbly remain in God’s presence, if we allow the Spirit to speak to us, if we keep listening to our God, then gradually it sinks in, and we are in awe, filled with deep gratitude.

Once we are exposed to the incredible and undeserved grace of our God, our lives are re-centred. We receive a new focus, different goals, different motivation for everything.

Then this life is not anymore about me satisfying my needs, or me trying to make a name for myself, or me trying to be a good and moral person in my own eyes.

Then it is about responding to the grace that we have so undeservedly received. Our entire life becomes about pleasing our God who has been and is so patient, so gracious and so generous with us. Then live by gratitude, empowered and guided by God's own Spirit. That is what Baptism should mean for us.

But there is another side to the story of Baptism as well. The same Spirit also helps us to become aware of the ongoing battle that we are involved in as Christians. To live out this new identity and this new life is not that easy.

It inevitably involves struggle, spiritual battle, attacks, hard choices, self-discipline, failures, stumbling, mistakes, testing, and much more. You see, God gives us all these gifts, new identity, new heart, and even His Spirit, but...

... unfortunately, till the end of this life our old sinful self is very much ever-present in us. The old you is not giving up. He is not going away. He doesn't want to change his direction; he doesn't want to live for Jesus and for our neighbours.

He is still pretty much the old selfish self in its best. But now, he is also threatened and agitated and angry because this new you wants to take over what he believes belongs to him. So, he will put up as good a fight as he can. Expect it!

What can we do with someone so feisty? Luther's explanation on Baptism in the Small Catechism cuts to the chase. We don't negotiate with this old self, we don't compromise with him, and we can't change him either, the one thing left is – we have to kill him, or as Luther puts "you need to drown him daily". That's it!

This is what the lives of baptized people are like. We can't escape this battle. And we can't take those God's gifts for granted. They can be lost. We need to fight for them against our closest person, our old self, using all the weapons that God has given to us.

His Word, His Holy Sacrament, prayer and mutual support and encouragement in the community of God's saints. We need one another for this. We do! We need the body of Christ, the Church. This is where we stand together and battle shoulder to shoulder, this is where we receive God's gifts, learn to appreciate them and celebrate them. Right here is your God given family.

This is where the story of Baptism brings us. This is where the story of our Baptism begins and continues – in the community of God's beloved people. But it doesn't end in this age, this story will continue forever. So glorious is the story of our Baptism!

May our gracious God forgive us when we don't understand and don't appreciate His gifts. May He help us to live as His baptised people, to meditate on He has done for us days and nights, so that our Baptism produces abundant fruits for God's glory! **Amen.**