

“Our Great Heritage: Holy Baptism”

How can water do such great things? It is an excellent question. It's one we might ask—and perhaps he did, too—about Naaman's dip in the Jordan River. That successful commander from Aram came to Israel in the hopes of finding a cure from his leprosy. And he very nearly left without one. He heard the servant relay the prophet's command: “Go, dip yourself in the Jordan River seven times.” But he really didn't like that idea. No magic words, no fancy gestures, the prophet didn't even talk to him in person. All he was directed to was the river and its water. Naaman must have looked out over the river and thought, “How could water do such a great thing?” And we know he thought, “How could **that** water do such a thing? Couldn't I take a dip in a beautiful river like one of those back home instead of in this muddy meandering stream?”

Of course, Naaman had servants with him, too. They convinced him that he had nothing to lose by trying this simple, sevenfold dip in the Jordan. So he did. And the water did exactly the great thing that had been promised. Naaman was completely cured of his leprosy! How can water do such great things? It can't. Not on its own. It can when it is used according to God's command—in which case it does exactly what he has promised.

Do you see what I am getting at? I am not saying that the account of Naaman is really a parable or that its primary purpose is to teach us something about baptism. It's not. It is history, an amazing story of God's grace in Old Testament times. But what I am saying is that clearly there are some similarities that can be recognized between the water that cleansed Naaman and the precious waters of Holy Baptism. Seeing these similarities may also help us see the grace of God and marvel at it. How can water do such great things? When water fills our baptismal font and is poured over the head of an infant, or a child, or an adult, it's just plain water...except that it is used by God's command and connected with God's Word. And because it is, it does amazing things according to God's promises.

Our sermon text today is just one of many that we could choose that focus to some degree on baptism. It is the command to us to baptize. Many refer to this command as the “Great Commission.” It certainly does have a prominent place as Jesus speaks these words to his disciples near the end of their time with him on earth. And his command is this: make disciples.

The phrase “make disciples” is interesting. In Greek, it is just one word, a verb or action word that is closely related to the word for disciple. The word has to do with teaching and learning. A disciple in this sense is one who learns from Jesus, and the context makes it clear that ultimately, making a disciple describes someone coming to faith. Of course, it is worth reminding ourselves what the Bible makes very clear: people do not convert other people. God does. It is not our job to convert. When we “make disciples,” we are only a small part of the process. We are doing what God invites us to do. We are not responsible for all of the results. That is exactly what our passage says. The Greek makes it clear that the making disciples is to be done in connection with baptizing and teaching. In other words, God tells us right here that we don't do the converting. The baptizing is God's work. The teaching is God's work when what is taught is God's Word. He just gives us the privilege to be his instruments in the process. Sure, a person gets to pour water and speak words, but God does the real work!

So in connection with making disciples, Jesus commands us to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. There is not a lot of specific instruction here, because most of that is very obvious. To baptize means to apply water like in washing. So we follow this instruction by applying water in the name of the Triune God. And God uses it to accomplish something even greater than the washing away of leprosy: through baptism, he washes away sin. Recall what our Second Lesson from 1 Peter said: “**baptism...now saves you**” (3:21). As a result of baptism, we have salvation!

That is true no matter how the water is applied. Some perhaps well-meaning Christians insist that one needs to be fully immersed in water in order for a baptism to be valid, but there are no such rules from Scripture. Instead, we most regularly bring water in the font in order to pour or sprinkle some on the head of the one being baptized.

Neither are the recipients of baptism limited. Our Savior says, “all nations,” so we do not exclude anyone from baptism. Adults are instructed first so that they are able to consent to baptism. But God has given spiritual oversight responsibilities to parents and guardians, so they are responsible for bringing infants and children to baptism. In the same way, we will not restrict baptism to any gender or race, or any such concept that restricts “all nations.”

No, the fact is that all nations require baptism. All nations are sinful from conception. All nations commit sins of thought and word and action. All nations depend completely on the grace of God, and God pours out his grace through the means, the tools, which he has established. That includes his holy Word and the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Along with Holy Communion, which we will discuss next week, we refer to these things as “Means of Grace” for that very reason. Baptism connects us intimately to the death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, so that we may have life and salvation.

Martin Luther wrote about baptism this way in his Large Catechism: “Thus we see how splendid a thing Baptism is. It snatches us out of the devil’s jaws, makes God our own, defeats and puts away sin, daily strengthens the new man in us, keeps functioning, and remains with us until we leave our present troubles to enter glory everlasting.”

As Luther mentions, baptism is not just something that happened to us some time ago. It is an important and valuable gift that remains in our possession right now. The blessings of baptism don’t go away. They are not dependent on us being able to remember the event of our baptism. They don’t expire. But the blessings of baptism may be lost by rejecting them through unbelief.

That seems to be at least part of why in this same connection our Savior commands not just baptism but also teaching. Faith that is created and strengthened in baptism, faith which receives the blessings that baptism gives, needs to be nourished and to grow. It is worth our time and effort to continue to dig deeper into what God’s Word says about baptism, about Holy Communion, about our lives of faith. It is appropriate for Christians to revisit their baptisms regularly, even daily, not in the sense of being baptized again, but in the sense of remembering what a precious gift was given to us there.

Consider a few examples. Often in our worship services, we will speak the words, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Perhaps you are even in the habit of crossing yourself when those words are spoken, just as the pastor often makes the sign of the cross when saying them. These words ought to remind us of Jesus’ commission and command to baptize. They ought to remind us that the name of our Triune God spoken over us at our baptism remains on us.

Or consider the earthly element involved in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Water is so readily available. It is essential for our very lives. And it can serve as a reminder of our baptisms. When we get up and splash water on our faces, we can think about how water connected with God’s Word has washed away our sins. We could be constantly reminded by the water that we drink or that we see all around us that we are God’s own dear children because in baptism he put his name on us.

And that is important, because we constantly need those reminders. It won’t take any of us long, perhaps before we even leave the building this morning, before we will sin. Very likely we will have sinned several times over by then, or by the time we return home, or do whatever else the day has in store for us. That is not the behavior of a disciple of Christ. That is not the way we wish to live nor the way God wants for us to live. So we see that the sinful nature in us has reared his ugly head again, and in sincere repentance, we return to our baptism. We say, “I am sorry for this sin, for all sins, even for the sins I may never know or recognize. But I know that they will not harm me because I am God’s own child, baptized into Christ. I am a new creation, and God will strengthen me to live as his new creation. Christ’s death has become my death, and his life is my life.”

How can water do such great things? It certainly can’t on its own. But used by God’s command in connection with God’s Word, it can do incredible things beyond even what we can truly appreciate right now. Let’s never leave behind an appreciation of this gift. Let’s say with Luther that “without the sacraments, no one can be a Christian.” Let us remind ourselves and each other. I have been baptized. I am saved. I will live as a child of God.

The Text: Matthew 28:16–20 (NIV)

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”