

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

John the Baptist was clearly a powerful preacher and teacher. In Advent we heard his proclamation of preparation. He proclaimed “*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (Luke 3:3), and he baptized the crowds. Then after baptism, he instructed them: “*Bear fruits in keeping with repentance*” (Luke 3:8). You might recall that the people asked John for specifics: “*What then shall we do?*” (Luke 3:10) And John answered: “Be generous with others. Don’t cheat others. Don’t extort or steal from others. Be content with your wages.”

In fact, so powerful was John’s preaching that the people coming to him wondered if he might be the Christ. They were “*in expectation,*” looking for the coming Messiah.

But John never had visions of grandeur. He knew his role; he was the forerunner; he was the one preparing for the Christ’s coming. John preached the “*mightier*” One, with himself so low in comparison that he wasn’t even unworthy to untie His sandals. John contrasted his water baptism with the Coming One’s baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Yes, even John’s baptism was preparatory. Although it would be practiced still for a while after Jesus instituted Christian baptism — Apollos at first, for example, knew only of John’s baptism (Acts 18:25), and later some disciples only had been baptized with the baptism of John (Acts 19:3) — eventually John’s baptism would be supplanted by Christian baptism that bestowed the Holy Spirit and ignited faith.

That’s some of what Christian baptism does: it gives the Holy Spirit — “*Repent,*” Peter preached, “*and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 2:38); and it makes believers — “*Go ... and make disciples,*” Jesus said, by “*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matt. 28:19).

But here, Jesus submits Himself to the preparatory baptism of John, preparing Him for the start of His ministry of saving His people from their sins. In His own baptism, Jesus hears the Father’s approval for what Jesus is about to preach to the people, and do for the people, and endure in place of the people — “*You are my beloved Son,*” came the Voice from heaven; “*with you I am well pleased.*”

In this preparatory baptism by John, Jesus is Himself anointed and made the Christ, the very thing the Christmas angel declared Him to be — “*the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove.*” Jesus is prepared in His baptism by John, endowed with power from on High that He might accomplish the task set before Him, the salvation of the world — “*you yourselves know what happened ...*

*after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, ... [how] [t]hey put him to death by hanging him on a tree, [how] God raised him on the third day and made him to appear ... to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses” (Acts 10:37-41).*

Having thus accomplished our salvation by His perfect life, by His all-sufficient death, by His triumphant resurrection, Jesus then tells His church, “Now, you go forth and preach the Good News of salvation to the world. Bring all nations to the living water that I supply, the ruddy water that flows out of my heart” (John 7:38), for I came “*by water and blood*” (1 John 5:6). “Wash them with this water and they will be cleansed, not of dirt that soils the body, but of sins that pollute the soul. Baptized them with this water and unite them to my death; exhort them to ‘*walk in newness of life,*’ ‘*set free from sin,*’ ‘*dead to sin and alive to God in [me, their Savior]*’; assure them that ‘*united with [me] in a death like [mine], [they] shall certainly be united with [me] in a resurrection like [mine]*’; comfort them that thus united with me, they are not chaff to be burned in ‘*unquenchable fire,*’ but wheat to be brought into my harvest barns.”

All this that Jesus has accomplished for us and is accomplishing in us (and more) is why we Lutherans so value our baptisms — not as something that we do, but as something that Christ does for us through this water ... efficacious for us by His sacrifice for us, empowered by His command and promises to us. “Baptism is not just plain water” (Small Catechism, Baptism, Part 1). St. Paul says, through this water and the Word, Jesus sanctifies us, cleansing us so that He “*might present [us] to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that [we] might be holy and without blemish*” (Eph. 5:26-27).

All these promises in Christ’s atonement, and in the promises attached to baptism are why we are so bold to come to church Sunday after Sunday. God welcomes us here as the baptized “*In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit*” that He might bestow ever more of His grace upon us and keep us by contrition and repentance and the Gospel of forgiveness strong in our baptismal faith, that we might endure to the end.

These promises are also why we begin our funerals with St. Paul’s words from our epistle concerning baptism, to tout not our works, but God’s grace in our lives, begun in baptism and continued to the end. And our assurance comes from that little word “certainly” — “we shall *certainly* be united with him in a resurrection like his” Actually that English word is two words in the Greek — ἀλλὰ καὶ — “but and,” though we might translate it as “yet especially” — certainly.

This certainty is a sentiment that Paul repeats a couple chapters later. Regardless what Satan or the world throws at us, *“in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us [God loved us in His only Son, Jesus]. For I am sure [—I am sure—] that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Rom. 8:37-39).

What Jesus began by His baptism, and accomplished by His “bloody baptism” on the cross, as Dr. Art Just likes to talk about it, what Jesus gave to His church in instituting a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire, what He does for us by that Spirit in bringing us to faith through baptism and preserving us in it as we daily remember it, all this is a wondrous gift of grace by our Lord and Savior, and for this we give Him endless praise. As Luther taught, “We have ... no greater jewel in body and soul. For by Baptism we are made holy and are saved” (Large Catechism, Part 4 Baptism, 46).

Lord, make us ever grateful for Your precious gift of baptism.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.