

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today we welcomed another child of God into Christ's kingdom just as we were once welcomed, for most of us in days long past. Like Lucy did today, we once passed through the Red Sea waters of our baptism. We were brought out of the devil's "*domain of darkness*" and brought into "*the kingdom of [the] beloved Son,*" our Redeemer Jesus Christ, "*in whom we have ... forgiveness of sins*" (Col. 1:13).

What a blessing is our baptism — one baptism, we confess. "I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins" (Nicene Creed), as Paul taught it: "*one Lord, one faith, one baptism*" (Eph. 4:5). God gives His grace through this "*washing of water with the word,*" (Eph. 5:26): it cleanses us, washing away sins (Acts 22:16); it gives rebirth into the kingdom of God (John 3:5); it gives eternal salvation (1 Pet. 3:21); and much more.

How providential that Lucy's baptism would fall on a Sunday when baptism is in view and the main character in the Gospel is John the Baptist. Not that Jesus isn't in view, but He doesn't make an appearance in the Gospel. Today, the Forerunner is front and center with his preaching and baptizing.

We meet John today out in the wilderness. His is the voice foretold long ago by the prophet Isaiah: "*prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain*" (Isa. 40:3-4). John does just that, but not with dynamite and giant earth-moving equipment. He does it with his voice, with his preaching.

In the New Testament, Luke too reports of John's divine calling. The angel Gabriel appeared to John's father Zechariah, and told him of the Lord's blessing to him and his barren wife Elizabeth. God would do a miracle. He would open Elizabeth's womb. They would bear a son, who would "*turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,*" who would come "*in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared*" (Luke 1:16-17).

John prepared the people first with his preaching. With Christmas on the horizon, our thoughts are on it. For us, Advent is all about preparing us for Jesus' birth. But John's preaching was not about the coming of that baby boy conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. His birth would have happened long ago; John was only six months older than his cousin Jesus, after all. No, John's preaching was directed at the coming of Jesus' ministry. It was time for John to decrease, and Jesus' ministry to increase (John 3:30). Aimed at making disciples for Jesus, therefore, John preached: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*"

That's how disciples of Christ are made: through repentance and being baptized. That's what Peter tells the Pentecost Day crowd, cut to the heart by his preaching of Christ crucified and risen from the dead: *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins"* (Acts 2:38). That's how Christ commissions His church to go forth to make disciples — *"baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you"* (Matt. 28:19-20). It's how He begins to reign among us; it's how He becomes our King.

It's how it happened again today. A little child was brought to the font in humility. She repented. We spoke the words on her behalf: "Do you renounce the devil?" "I do renounce him!" "Do you renounce all his works?" "I do renounce them!" "Do you renounce all his ways?" "I do renounce them!" She also confessed the faith into which she was being baptized: "Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?" Again, we answered for Lucy: "Yes ...." "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son?" "Yes ...." "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" "Yes ...."

Then water was poured over her, a washing away of sins in the Triune name of God. And we believe in the promise. That is, we trust that she will have received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:39), a distinction that John makes between his baptism and Jesus' baptism. Jesus' baptism comes with *"the Holy Spirit and fire."* Therefore, we trust that the Spirit will kindle faith in this sinner's heart, and that she will receive the blessings of baptism: forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation (Small Catechism, Baptism, Second). We trust that God has "sundered [Lucy] from the number of the unbelieving, [and] preserved [her] dry and secure in the holy ark of Christendom" (Zion baptismal rite).

It's true, people disbelieve God's promises in baptism and deride it. By outward appearances, the water looks just like plain water. And why not? It comes out of the faucet. Skeptics wag their tongues and ask "How can water do such great things?" But we Lutherans know the answer to that question, because "Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God's command and combined with God's word" (Small Catechism, Baptism, First). We answer with Luther: "Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this word of God in the water. For without God's word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit" (Small Catechism, Baptism, Third). God's word makes the difference!

Now, baptism is a one time event, as I mentioned before: we "acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins" (Nicene Creed). Whether or not you remember it is not the point. That doesn't change the fact that God was at work in this Sacrament. Once baptized, you *are* baptized. Applying water a second or third time

adds nothing; doing some rite of “debaptism” doesn’t void the Sacrament (see Wikipedia on “debaptism”).

On the other hand, without faith, one does not receive the benefits of baptism. Renounce Christ, renounce His sacrifice for sins, renounce His victorious resurrection, renounce the sacrament that unites one to Christ, and you renounce the everlasting life that awaits those who confess Him. Scripture says “*Baptism ... saves*” (1 Pet. 3:21), but not just by the act alone. Baptism calls us to faith. Peter calls it “*an appeal to God for a good conscience*” (1 Pet. 3:21).

It calls us to faith in Christ the Crucified, into whose death we are united by baptism: “*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death*” (Rom. 6:3-4). Baptism calls us to ongoing contrition and repentance, a daily drowning of the Old Adam in us. Baptism calls us to a new life of righteousness and purity — a walking in “*newness of life*” (Rom. 6:4).

John preached about our response this way: “*Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.*” John’s preaching prefigured Jesus’ own call to repentance and to faith: “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*” (Mark 1:15). And then Scriptures call us to “*do good to everyone*” (Gal. 6:10). Luther said, “it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.” On the other hand, “Whoever does not do such works ... is an unbeliever” (*Luther’s Works*, 35:370-1). At the end, the axe will be laid to the unfruitful tree. That tree will be cut down and tossed into the fire.

Not so, the fruitful tree, that is, the person of faith. That “person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God, who has shown him” immeasurable grace in Christ Jesus (*Luther’s Works*, 35:371).

This is God’s desire for His new disciple Lucy Ann, a life of repentance, faith, and good works. By His Spirit, God grant it to her along with all of us, that we may, in the words of St. Paul, “*live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works*” (Tit. 2:12-14).

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