

### ***Marks of the Church: Holy Baptism***

In the name of God's only Son, given in love unto death for us; dear friends in Christ: Last week as we began this series of Lenten evening devotions, I started by asking what the Church is. What we saw is that there are a number of different ways to define it. If I said to one of you, "I'll meet you at the church", you would understand that I meant this building that we're in. But if I said, "I am a member of St. Paul Lutheran Church", you'd understand that I was referring to the congregation, the body of believers whose names appear on the roster. If I spoke of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, then you would know I meant the larger church body that this congregation is a part of. And if I spoke of the Holy Christian Church on earth, well, then you would know that I meant all those people living on the planet who confess Jesus Christ as Lord, who trust in his atoning sacrifice for sin, and who look to him and to him alone to give them forgiveness, life, and salvation.

It's this last definition that we are focusing on in these devotions: the whole Church. And with regard to it, we considered that while we can define it, we really can't see it. The Church consists of all the faithful; but faith can't be seen. Even if someone says they have faith, they could be lying. On the other end of the spectrum, someone could believe and be a part of the Church; but you might not be aware of it. Remember how at one point in his career the prophet Elijah thought that he was the only faithful man left in all of Israel. The Lord told him no, there are seven thousand others who remain faithful. Just because you don't see them and know who they are doesn't mean they don't belong to me. Or consider places like the Islamic Republic of Iran. There Christians are persecuted. They are often imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes killed for the alleged crime of "insulting Islam" or their prophet Mohammed. For these reasons, few if any of them go around publicly announcing their Christian faith. But the Church *is* there. And thanks largely to radio outreach and the internet, we know many more are coming to faith in Christ all the time.

These realities led us to a question, though: if we can't see the Church, if it's invisible, how can we know where it is? The answer, we discovered, is that the Church is made manifest in its marks. It's kind of like when you smell smoke, you know there must be a fire – even if you don't see it. Same thing with the Church: where the marks are, there the Church must be.

There are seven such marks. We considered the first of them last week. It's the Holy Word of God. Where God's Word is being heard, taught, and explained in its truth and purity, there the Church must be because it is by the proclamation of God's Word that the Holy Spirit brings people to faith in Christ and continues to keep them there. So, when looking for the Church, instead of looking for a building or particular group of people, what you really ought to be doing is listening for the Word of God. It's an audible rather than visible mark.

The second mark, which is our topic for this evening, is both audible *and* visible. It will come as no surprise to you if you've paid any attention at all to the readings, the hymns, and the selection from the Catechism we reviewed earlier that it's Holy Baptism. Oddly enough, though it is the second mark of the Church, for most of us it was the first mark we encountered when coming to the faith. It was our introduction to the God of mercy, our doorway into his Holy Church. By Baptism the Lord claimed us as his own, washed away our sins, and gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit to work in us saving faith in Christ. By Baptism the Lord gave us the gift of spiritual sight.

This is evident by what Jesus told Nicodemus: “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” When Nicodemus, who was still spiritually groping around in the dark didn’t understand, Jesus elaborated: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Clearly, Jesus was talking about Baptism – which as you recall, Pharisees like Nicodemus had rejected. When John appeared calling people to repent and to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins, they thought, “Why should we repent? We’re the good guys. We obey the laws of God and then some. We have no need to repent or to undergo John’s new-fangled baptism.” They couldn’t see their sins – the chief of which was their prideful self-righteousness. Spiritually, they were in the dark.

But God brings darkness to light through Baptism. We see this already in the first three verses of the Bible. In the beginning God creates the heavens and earth; but the earth is a mess: dark, chaotic, empty, devoid of life. It looks like nothing good could ever come of it. Ah, but then the Lord positions his Spirit above the dark watery chaos. God the Father then speaks the Word—the Word that we know from John chapter one is none other than God the Son. So look: you’ve got God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and you’ve got water and the Word. And what happens when these things come together? The light turns on. Father, Son, Spirit, water, Word – illumination. God’s first act of creation is baptismal. By it spiritual sight becomes possible.

The same thing happened when you were brought as an infant to the font. You were conceived and born in sin. Spiritually speaking you were dark, chaotic, empty, devoid of life. You were dead in sin. But the Spirit drew near and hovered over the face of the water. The Word of the Father was spoken. And what happened? The Light came on: the Light of Christ by which you were introduced to the Triune God whose name was placed upon you; the Light of Christ by which the Triune God now sees you: made alive with Christ, washed, redeemed, reborn of the Spirit, and made an heir of his kingdom. God accomplished all this for you through the simple act of Baptism.

Now, with the first mark of the Church, God’s Holy Word, we saw that while all groups gathered around listening to it have it, not all of them have it in equal measure. No, to the extent that they deny portions of it or try to explain away parts they don’t like or water it down, they are mishandling it to the detriment of those who are hear. The same thing happens with Holy Baptism. Pretty much all Protestant church bodies other than us Lutherans turn things around in their teaching on Baptism. Instead of being a work of God, something that he performs on people by water and the Word, it is taught as a work of man, something we do to show our obedience and submission to Christ. God doesn’t do anything by it. And what we accomplish by it besides acting in obedience is supposedly only a symbol of spiritual works that God performed already when he brought you to faith at the time of your conversion experience. So, what really matters is your subjective conversion experience, not your objective Baptism.

These are dangerous waters to tread. It leaves you looking at yourself and wondering, “Did I really feel what I did? Did I sufficiently and sincerely enough give my life to Christ? Am I being obedient and faithful enough to him?” And that can lead to doubt and despair – especially if you examine your life and realize that you’re still sinning every day, which of course is what you do. But by denying the objective reality of what God did through Baptism and throwing you back on your subjective thoughts, feelings, and actions, you end up standing on a shaky and unstable foundation – one that is highly likely to fail.

Christians who deny God’s objective work in Baptism rob themselves of the very comfort and assurance God intends to give through this precious gift. And the amazing thing is how

hard they have to work to deprive themselves. Every time the Scripture speaks of Baptism, it tells what it does. By it God grants spiritual sight, he opens the kingdom, he gives rebirth, he washes away sin, he saves, he clothes with Christ, he gives the Holy Spirit, he buries and raises with Christ, he performs the circumcision made without hands that includes the subject into the covenant of his grace ... the list goes on and on. And in all of these passages, the person receiving the baptism is passive; that is to say God is doing the work and they are being acted upon. And in each case, a person who denies the objective nature of Baptism will look at the passage and say, "I know what it says, but Baptism cannot possibly do that; so, it can't mean what it says." I know. Over the years I've had these conversations many times.

How much easier, how much more comforting and reassuring it is simply to take God at his Word. Luther said it this way: "[Baptism] is a public sign and precious, holy possession whereby God's people is made holy, for it is a holy bath of regeneration through the Holy [Spirit], in which we bathe and are washed by the Holy [Spirit] from sin and death, as in the innocent, holy blood of the Lamb of God. Where you see this mark, know that the holy Christian people [that is, the Church] must be there." And so it is. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***