

**The Baptism of Our Lord – January 7, 2024**  
Mark 1:4-11

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

“What is Baptism?” I got asked that question by one of our children on her way out of the door on the third Sunday of Advent when we had part of the account of Jesus’ baptism from the Gospel according to John. She was first in line, and there were a bunch of you behind her, waiting to get on with your Sunday. So I had to say to her, “that’s a really good question! We’re going to have to talk about that another time. But don’t forget that question, because it’s a really good one.”

So what better occasion than today, on the Baptism of Our Lord, not only for our children, but for us older folks as well? How would you answer a child who asks you about baptism? Or how *have* you answered that question in the past. Lots of you have children. Some of you have grandchildren. Has it come up?

Luther treats baptism in both his Small and Large Catechism, and there he breaks it down to four main points. The list I put together in thinking about this, using both Luther and the New Testament, has eight points, but they fall easily under two main categories, which I’ll get to in a minute. But first, this is how I would boil it down, both for children and adults. And in doing that I would recognize that I was really being asked two questions at the same time, both “what is it,” and “what does it mean?” (Or why do we do it?) The answer to the what question is that it’s water that is poured over a person, or that a person is dunked in, together with God’s word of promise that you are God’s child. So baptism is water and God’s promise put together. The meaning question can be gotten at by a different answer, and that’s this: You can think of baptism as a hug from God. Then I would ask a question, “What is a hug? Think of a hug from your mother.” “A hug is when your mother puts her arms around you and squeezes a little bit.” “But what does a hug from you mother *mean*?” “It means that she loves you very much.” And so if baptism is a hug from God then it means that God loves you very much, just like your mother loves you, only even more so.

Depending on the child, that could be enough right there. But also, depending on the child, there could be more questions and a lot more to talk about. And in that case, let’s think some more about baptism with the help of today’s readings and that little list I put together from Luther and the Bible.

Where did I get the idea that baptism is like a hug? Well, I got it from a Lutheran first communion curriculum that I used a number of years ago, so I didn’t make that up. But it fits very well with what Luther emphasized in talking about baptism. First, that it is both a physical and a spiritual thing at the same time. For baptism you need both the physical component of water and the word of God together, because baptism is for the whole person, body and soul, heart and mind. The body is touch by the water and the soul heart and mind are touched by the word. If the message is one of love for the whole person, then a hug fits the bill. So, baptism is God’s embrace of our whole being.

Second, or point 1B on my list, this baptismal embrace of God incorporates us into the Body of Christ and makes us a part of God’s family. This was an emphasis in Jesus’ own baptism. “You are my son! With you I am well pleased!” Another way of paraphrasing this could be, “You are my child, I love you! You fill me with delight!”

Third, or 1C, this baptismal embrace is *God’s* activity, not ours. “To be baptized in God’s name,” wrote Luther in the Large Catechism, “is to be baptized not by human beings but by God

himself.” This understanding is not shared by all Christians. Many Protestants, those who will not baptize children, think of baptism as something we do for God, not something God does for us, and so you have to know what you’re doing when you do it. They wouldn’t agree with this Lutheran hug analogy. Which is too bad, because they take the emphasis off of God’s grace and put it on *our* actions, or our failures to act. And that is a formula for trouble.

Finally for point 1, 1D, this embrace of God conveys God’s comfort and assurance of faithfulness. Just like young children run into their mother’s arms when something bad or scary happens, so in times of trouble is God’s baptismal embrace there for us. I think remember a Luther scholar saying that Luther’s wife Katie gets credit for this emphasis. Luther was known for his bouts of depression, times when he would despair of his efforts. Katie, it is said, would tell him, “Snap out of it, Martin! Remember that you are baptized!” Whether apocryphal or not, that idea made its way into the Large Catechism, written four years after their wedding.

Now on to point 2. Baptism is not only God’s embrace, it is God’s act of new creation. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation,” Paul writes in 2 Corinthians. For Paul, being “in Christ” means being baptized. So, it’s no accident that our lectionary gives us the first verses of Genesis 1 for our first reading today. Notice the parallels between those verses and Jesus’ baptism in Mark. There is water, there is the spirit, there is God speaking and naming. And just a quick note about that “wind from God” in the second verse, which is still the first sentence. You have heard me say before that the Hebrew word for wind also means breath or spirit. But the verb here for “swept” also means “brood.” B-R-O-O-D, what birds do with eggs and hatchlings. They settle in on top of them, or “hover envelopingly” over them, as my favorite dictionary puts it. Mark’s description of Jesus’ baptism is meant to evoke Genesis one. God is doing something new and wonderful in Jesus’ baptism, but also in each of our baptisms as well.

Second, point 2B, for there to be new creation there has to be death of the old. Being baptized into Christ, Paul says in Romans, is to be baptized into his death, so that we might be connected to his resurrection. In Mark, at Jesus baptism, he first goes down into the water in order to then come up out of the water to receive the Spirit. Baptism is dying to sin in order to be raised to a life freed from the ultimate power of sin, death, and evil.

Third, point 2C, that brooding, creating Spirit that descended upon Jesus comes upon us also in baptism and becomes a guiding and compelling feature of our newly created lives. The most important way this plays out is by giving us faith. If baptism is God’s loving embrace, faith is the arms of our new self that reach out and grab ahold of the one who holds us. Have you ever put your finger into the hand of a newly born child. They’ll grab it. So it is with our faith when God’s creative and redeeming word is spoken into our lives.

Finally, point 2D, baptism births us into a new and different kind of life. That is what repentance means. Repentance is not only about feeling sorry about our past sin. It is, literally, a change of heart and mind, a new way of thinking, trusting, and loving that is the manifestation of our new creation. John the Baptist knew that that change was important, and what his baptism was was a way of impressing that importance on God’s people. But John’s baptism was about what we need to do, but ultimately cannot do by our own power. We cannot recreate or rebirth ourselves. Only God can do that. And that’s what’s going on in our second reading that I don’t have time to talk about now.

So there it is. What is baptism? Baptism is a hug from God, a warm embrace that loves us to death and back to life again. Thanks be to God for such a gift. May we value that gift, return to it daily to remember who we are and whose we are, and may the peace of God, given to us in baptism, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.