

Welcome to 2017, which, among other things, is the 500th anniversary year of the Reformation, when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses and sparked the debate that would lead to the reformation of the Church, the formation of the Lutheran movement, and, actually, the transformation of western society. One of the ways we are going to mark this anniversary year here at CTK is by focusing a bit on Luther's Small Catechism at various times during the year, especially this coming fall. But here's a little teaser:

And for all you church nerds out there—yes, there is an app for that. Luther's Small Catechism is available as a free mobile app from Augsburg Fortress. All of the seven sections of the Catechism, plus some additional material right here in your handheld device—in English and in Spanish.

Since today is a Baptism Sunday, AND we just read about Jesus' baptism, let's take a quick review at portions of the baptism section of the Catechism.

- **What is Baptism?** Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God's command and combined with God's word.
- **What benefits does Baptism give?** It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.
- **How can water do such great things?** 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.

How's that for a mini-refresher course on baptism? Of course, Jesus' baptism, which we just read about in the gospel, is not exactly the same as our baptisms, although there are naturally some overlaps. Jesus is baptized by John—John the Baptist who has spent his adult life preparing the way for Jesus, talking about the one who is to come after him, whose baptism will be so much better, so much more special and holy than John's, only to have Jesus insist, despite John's vigorous objections, that John also baptize him. It's all a bit confusing for John, and maybe a bit confusing for us, too, as we are tempted to so quickly move on from thinking and talking about Jesus's baptism to considering our own baptisms.

Still, it's only natural for us to make these comparisons, especially when we have the privilege to witness and take part in three baptisms here at CTK this morning. And, since we often say when someone is baptized in our services that this can serve as a reminder to all of us who are baptized, a way of remembering our own baptisms—not the sense strictly of reminiscing or getting nostalgic, but rather in a way that leads to us renewing our own baptismal promises.

I was two weeks old to the day—practically to the hour—when I was baptized in at St. John's Lutheran Church by the Sea in Long Beach, NY. That was more than 51 years ago, and while I don't remember anything at all about the day, I do remember that I am baptized, and thank my parents for bringing me—a helpless baby, completely dependent on them for every last one of my needs—to the waters of baptism so early in my life. Yes, we Lutheran Christians allow for the practice of infant baptism, for just this reason—to emphasize that first and foremost, baptism is not at all our action, but God acting first, God acting on our behalf, God acting to name us, to claim us, to save us, to restore us.

Fast forward about 29 years, and the first baptism I had the privilege to perform as a pastor was at Trinity Lutheran Church in Brattleboro, Vermont. Two were baptized that day—a 12-year-old girl and her mother. Actually, it was the 12-year-old who decided she wanted to be baptized, and in talking about it with her mother—thinking she was talking her mother into it—she actually convinced her mother that she, too, wanted to be baptized. It was a great moment for this family, of course, and a memorable one for me, too, being my first, but I also remember it was a great celebratory reminder for the congregation. See, for years, a vast majority of baptisms at that congregation, like most Lutheran congregations in North America, I'm guessing, were infants. This could have given the impression that baptism is ONLY for infants, and that someone who wasn't baptized as a child somehow missed out on the one and only opportunity to know God's love, God's mercy, God's grace in this way. Instead, that baptism on that day—like the fact that among those baptized today are a young man of 22-years—serving as a reminder that our God is not an either-or God, but a both-and God. Yes, we allow for infant baptism since we believe that God always acts first, but at the same time, we don't rule out baptism of older folks who have themselves decided to get baptized. In fact, it's an incredibly wonderful thing for us to witness and take part in a baptism like that—and part of me is actually envious of the fact that you, AJ that unlike me and I'd venture to say most of us in this room, you'll actually remember your baptism, the actual details of the actual day that God brought you to these waters and named you and claimed you as God's own beloved child, the day you decided to respond to God's calling in your life.

Back to Jesus and his baptism. He chose to respond in a particular way at a particular time to God's calling and leading in his life, too. His baptism is Jesus' first action as an adult, and through it, he affirms his identity as God's chosen one. John's baptism has been calling people to a way of life that expresses commitment to God. At first, John protests Jesus presenting himself for baptism. But Jesus insists, and so his baptism also expresses his commitment to live God's will to act faithfully to his God-given commission to be God's agent in the world. And finally, God confirms both Jesus' identity and his commitment by sending the empowering Spirit. The climax of the scene is not the baptism itself but God's declaration of Jesus' identity, the voice and vision Jesus encounters as he comes up from the water.

Just like each of you, Jesus chose to respond in a particular way at a particular time to God's calling and leading in his life, too. That's the paradox—that the similarity of Jesus' baptism to ours is exactly how particular his was to his own context as ours are to our

contexts. Courtney and Neil bring Elizabeth to these waters and Mike and Megan bring Mara to these waters because of what they believe, how they experience God moving in their lives, how they understand the gift and calling of God to work for their children. AJ, Jim and Conner have decided a bit more on their own—though certainly not without input and influence from those around you who love you—to respond to God at this moment, in this way, in these waters. And though his context, his identity, his calling was so completely different from our own, being the Messiah, God's chosen one, Immanuel, God Incarnate, even so Jesus chose a particular time, a particular river, a particular baptism by John, in the midst of a particular people in need of a particular kind of healing and salvation. That he begins his early ministry in such a specific time, place and situation goes to the very heart of his incarnation. While it certainly would have made logical sense for the Messiah to baptize the messenger, and not the other way around, Jesus shows in this kick-off to his ministry that he is going to be the kind of leader, the kind of teacher, the kind of Messiah and Lord who has come not to gather power unto himself, but rather to disperse it, to share it, to lend it to others, to empower them, beginning with his own cousin, John. From the get-go, Jesus seems to be making clear that he intends to share his power to love and serve and reconcile and heal the world with the church—that is, with all of us.

In Jesus' baptism, as well as our own, we are reminded that with baptism comes the reminder that this life of faith is not an individual affair. Among so many other benefits, our baptism places us into community, and while we can remember our baptism and rely on its promises as way of assuring our own individual security, we also know that it is more than that—much more than that. We're all in this together. And baptism—done in the midst of the regular gathering of the people of God—is one of the ways we remember this, too.

At the risk of singling him out, I want to share with you some of the things AJ shared with me as I met with him and each of those being baptized today. AJ told me about some of his motivations for being baptized, for wanting to draw closer to God, for wishing to become part of the family of God, the body of Christ in this place known as Christ the King. In particular, he shared with me how much he has been moved by the familiar image and story by Mary Stevenson typically called "Footprints." Now, for many of us, this image has been so familiar on posters and post cards, tee-shirts and coffee mugs for so many years that some of us—myself included, I must admit—might be tempted to roll our eyes at its kitschiness. I think it is maybe a case of familiarity breeding contempt, because the gist of the story is so good, so helpful, so meaningful, as it was to AJ in bringing him to these waters today. A man dreams that he is walking with Jesus, and there, throughout every stage of his life are the footprints in the sand, where Jesus and the man have walked together. But at certain key moments—trying moments of the man's life, there is only one set of footprints, and the man wonders why Jesus would desert him just when he needed him most. To which Jesus replies: no, my beloved child. I would never leave you. At those times in your life, when you see only one set of footprints, that's when I carried you.

AJ, Elizabeth, Mara, Jim and Connor, Jesus promises you today to walk with you every step of the way. And more likely than not, there will be times when Jesus will carry you,

too. And if that weren't enough, that is pretty much what we, as the church, promise you as well. As the Body of Christ in this time and place, as Jesus' hands, his feet, his body, his presence in this time and place, we, too, promise to accompany you, to walk along side you. And yes, at times, we get to carry each other. We take turns. You will have to carry us at difficult times in our lives, just as we will have to carry you from time to time. That's part of the deal we're making with you today. You are one of us—and we are one in Christ. I need you, and you need me, too. We belong together. Thanks be to God!

AMEN.