

Baptism of Jesus

1 Peter 3:18-22: "Waters of Destruction and Salvation"

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**In Nomine Iesu**

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Almighty God, in Your righteous judgment You once condemned the unbelieving world to death in the waters of the Flood; but in Your greater mercy You preserved believing Noah and his family upon the same waters. In Your judgment You drowned hard-hearted Pharaoh and all his armies in the Red Sea; but in Your mercy You led Your people Israel through the same waters on dry ground. In these ways You prefigured the wonders of our Baptismal water. In the Baptism of Your own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, You made the Jordan and all water a holy washing away of sin. In the name of Jesus, Your beloved Son, mercifully look upon Your servants. Preserve us in the true faith, and by the power of the saving flood of Holy Baptism continue to confound Satan and drown the Old Adam, our sinful nature, which continually torments us. Deliver us from the number of the unbelieving and preserve us in the Ark of Your Church, that we may serve You in all fervency of spirit and joyful hope, and at last attain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (Luther's Deluge Prayer)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the third chapter of St. Peter's First Epistle. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. / Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him. <sup>(ESV)</sup>

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, who was crucified, died, and was buried, who descended into hell, and who on the third day rose again from the dead in order to save us, dear fellow redeemed:

Imagine what it would be like if you and the members of your household were the only Christians in your community, the only Christians you knew about anywhere. And your neighbors were not peace-loving and law-abiding. They were concerned only for themselves. They lied, cheated, and stole from one another and from you. They despised everything you stood for. They ridiculed you for your morals and flaunted their sins in your face.

And imagine in a climate like this that God told you to build a church on your property, a big church. Your neighbors would soon come over to mock you and ridicule you. "What is that for?"

Do you think anyone's going to join your little cult? What a waste of time! What idiots!" And the more that church took shape, the more it would irritate and anger them. They would plot to destroy the whole project, or at least to hinder you in your work. That would be a difficult job. You might even wonder why God let you experience all that pain.

This is a lot like how it was for Noah when the LORD told him to build a large boat in a local field. *"The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually"* (Gen. 6:5). So the LORD decided to destroy everything on the earth He had made. *"But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD"* (v. 8). God told him to build an ark for himself, his family, and two of every sort of animal. These would be saved from destruction while all other living things would be wiped out by a worldwide flood.

Noah did *"all that God commanded him"* (v. 22), but it most certainly wasn't pleasant. As long as it took to build that ark, his wicked neighbors made his life miserable. When the ark was finally completed and the LORD told Noah and his family to *"go into the ark"* (7:1), they must have felt some relief. Their hard work under challenging conditions was finally done. But there would have been sadness too, sadness that their unbelieving neighbors would not only die, but would perish eternally.

Then the waters came. It rained forty days and forty nights. It rained so much that the ark lifted off the ground where it had been built and began to float. Noah and his sons may have wondered how the ark would do on the water. It held up just fine. They must have exchanged smiles when the great boat began to move and rock back and forth. They were going to survive these terrible rains. God had saved them!

Outside the boat, the feeling was much different. There it was all chaos, man and animal clambering for the high ground, family members abandoning each other in a bid to survive, the waters rising and finally covering every tree, hill, and mountain. Total destruction. No survivors.

Those waters did two things at the same time: they destroyed all living things on earth, and they saved Noah and his family. The same waters had two very different effects. In today's text the apostle Peter writes that *"Baptism... corresponds to this."* God wants us to learn about Baptism from the worldwide flood. He wants us to understand how the waters of Baptism both destroy and save.

First of all we should be clear what Baptism is. Our Catechism states that *"Baptism is not just water, but it is the water used according to God's command and connected with His Word."* Where does God command Baptism? It is when Jesus told His apostles, *"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you"* (Mat. 28:18-20, NKJV). Here Jesus commissioned His Church to *"make disciples of all the nations"* by baptizing and teaching them. Baptism is the application of water while the words of Jesus are spoken: *"in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."*

Jesus says that *“all authority has been given to [Him]”* to command this. But why should we recognize this authority, and how do we know His words have the power to do anything in Baptism? The reason Jesus can make this claim is spelled out in today’s sermon text. It says that *“Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous.”* He did not suffer for His own sins – there were none! He suffered for our sins. He was the righteous one, perfectly holy, pure in every way. And He gave Himself for the unrighteous ones, for you and me and everyone else. But this is strange. Why would someone who was perfect suffer for the wicked? It was so that *“He might bring us to God.”*

Jesus wanted to save us. We deserved to be destroyed, to be sent to eternal suffering in hell. Sin against God demands a response of justice. But instead of condemning us, God condemned His own perfect Son. Jesus stepped in our place. He took our punishment. He died our death and suffered our hell. With His saving work on the cross complete, Jesus said, *“It is finished”* (Joh. 19:30) and gave up His spirit.

Today’s text describes what happened next. Christ was *“put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.”* This is what we confess in the Apostles’ Creed when we say that Jesus *“descended into hell.”* He did not go there to suffer some more – He had already suffered the punishment of hell on the cross. He went to *“proclaim to the spirits in prison.”* Peter writes that *“the spirits in prison”* are those who *“formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared.”* So these are the souls of the unbelievers who rejected God’s promises.

And what did Jesus proclaim to them? He did not proclaim their forgiveness or salvation. The souls of unbelievers in hell cannot pass over into heaven (Luk. 16:26). Jesus descended into hell to proclaim His victory, to show Whom they had rejected when they chose the sin of the world over the salvation of God’s Word. He went there to show them why those destructive waters came upon them and why Noah and his family were spared.

But His death and His decent into hell was not enough for Jesus to claim *“all authority”* for sending His disciples to baptize and teach. What authority could He have if He was buried in the tomb and never emerged again? His claim is entirely dependent on His resurrection. If Jesus did not rise again from the dead, He is nobody’s Savior. If He did not rise again from the dead, He is nothing but another dead man. But He did rise, on the third day. Peter witnessed it, along with more than 500 others (1Co. 15:6).

Who would question the authority and power of One who died and rose again? If this happened today, think how the world would flock to that person. All would want to know his secret or somehow get a share of that power, so that they also could rise again. This is exactly what Jesus gives us in Baptism. He gives the power to rise again from the dead.

When you were baptized, the waters of Baptism brought both destruction and salvation to you. Like the unbelievers destroyed in the flood, the waters of Baptism drowned your unbelief. Your sins were washed off in the water, and Christ’s righteousness was poured over you. Baptism, as today’s text says, is not some sort of outward cleansing or *“a removal of dirt from the body.”* It is *“an appeal to God for a good conscience.”* And on what grounds does Baptism make that appeal? *“[T]hrough the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”*

We receive a clean conscience in Baptism because Jesus rose again from the dead. He took our sins to the cross, buried them in the grave, and rose again without them. Since He paid for and buried them, your sins are not stuck to you anymore. Your Baptism delivered this forgiveness and salvation to you. Romans 6:4 says, *"We were buried therefore with [Christ Jesus] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."* Since you have passed through the destructive and saving waters of Baptism, you now *"walk in newness of life."* You were a sinner, and now you are a saint. You were dead, and now you are alive.

You could not make this happen; Jesus did it for you. On your own, you are no better than the sinners destroyed in the waters of the flood. The good works you have done would not be enough to get you on the ark today. Noah and his family were not saved because of good works. They were saved by faith, which God worked in them through His Word. Faith has also been worked in you through the same Word of grace. This faith clings to the promises Jesus has connected to Baptism.

Jesus' statement about having *"all authority"* was no empty boast. He does have all authority in heaven and on earth. He sits *"at the right hand of God"* with every power subjected to Him. What Jesus does with His power is deliver forgiveness and life. That's how He *"flexes His muscles,"* so to speak. He ensures that His saving Word and Sacraments continue to be administered. He wants you to be comforted by His promises, so that you do not fear His destruction but rejoice in His salvation.

The Lord has not commanded you to build a big church in your backyard. But He has called you to return to your Baptism every day by repentance and faith. He wants those cleansing waters to be your daily refuge, because in those waters, your sins were washed away, you became His child, and you were joined to your Savior Jesus, who suffered, died, and rose again for you.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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