

Easter Vigil

Tonight is the traditional night for new baptisms in the church. Like many churches, we don't have any new baptisms tonight. But, even if we have no new baptisms, we remember and celebrate our own baptism. In your baptism, God becomes your Father, Jesus becomes your Brother, and the Holy Spirit becomes your Companion. What an incredible gift that is. It comes to you daily to remind you who you are in Christ. Newness of life is yours in your baptism! (Romans 6:4) You know this from the catechism:

"He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, who He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying." (Titus 3:5-8)

God is the actor. You are acted upon. God washes you and gives you new birth and renewal. He justifies you with His grace and makes you an heir. You now have a living hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying because God is acting. If God acts, you can have certainty.

Sin and shame are the enemies of certainty.

Sin can be catastrophic like an earthquake or it can be corrosive like rust. We call these mortal sins and venial sins, respectively. Here's a formal definition of them:

Venial sins are sins of weakness; they are limited to believers, and do not kill faith, because they are not done intentionally. In themselves they are real sins and are worthy of death, but through faith Christians have forgiveness for them. Mortal sins are such as kill faith and drive the Holy

Spirit from the heart, because no man can sin willfully intentionally and at the same time believe in Christ for the forgiveness of his sins.¹

There are two important things to note from this definition: 1) all sin damns eternally and 2) some sins drive out the Holy Spirit.

Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that He didn't come to abolish the law.

"For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, nor a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished." (Matthew 5:18)

He then goes on to show that even the tiniest transgression against the law in thought or word breaks the Law of God. As James says,

"For whoever keeps the whole law but falls in one point has become accountable for all of it." (James 2:10)

So, any transgression in thought, word, or deed makes you a transgressor against the whole law of God and worthy of eternal death. We must be constantly vigilant against sin in our life and treat it with the only cure available to us, namely, the forgiveness of sins. That's why we remember our Baptism daily. Remembering your baptism daily is nothing other than drowning the old Adam "by daily contrition and repentance." Contrition is sorrow over sin and repentance is turning away from sin towards forgiveness in Christ. Daily, you examine yourself against the Ten Commandments to see where you have sinned and ask God for forgiveness and believe that it is yours in Christ through faith. If a sin bothers your conscience enough, you seek absolution through your pastor or a close Christian friend. The healing balm of forgiveness soothes your conscience and removes your shame.

¹ A Summary of Christian Doctrine, Koehler, page 73, CPH

But there are sins that endanger your eternal life. They endanger your eternal life because they drive the Holy Spirit from you. When King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah, he lost the Holy Spirit. Gross sins like murder, adultery, fornication, theft, idolatry, and slander drive the Holy Spirit away. Lists found in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 5:3-6, and Revelation 22:12-16 show us these mortal sins. Without the Holy Spirit we are lost.

But thanks be to God, the remedy for mortal sins is the exact same as for venial sins. God sent Nathan to David to confront him over his grave sin. David repented and received forgiveness. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote Psalm 51 which comforts troubled consciences with the healing balm of God's mercy towards sinners! When you fall from your baptism, you don't need to get baptized again. There's only one baptism. What returns you to your baptismal graces is the forgiveness of your sins found in absolution and the Lord's Supper.

Venial sins wear away at your faith like rust in metal and mortal sins wreck your faith like a natural disaster, but both are washed away in the flood of forgiveness that God so richly delivers through His Word and Sacraments.

When God forgives you, He doesn't remember your sin. Hear God's promise to you:

"He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him." (Psalm 103:10-13)

Shame comes in when we remember our sin. The devil and the world try to shame us by bringing our sin to our attention. If God doesn't remember your sin, then you certainly shouldn't remember it.

And you certainly shouldn't give into the devil's accusations. The perfect response to both situations is to say:

"I AM BAPTIZED!"

Your baptism is a precious gift. And it's not a one-time only gift. The act of remembering your baptism brings again to you the amazing gift of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. You have no reason for shame. You are a member of God's family. He's your Father and Jesus is your Brother, and the Holy Spirit is your companion. That's why you can have a living hope. A hope that prevails against any situation, even death. Death is God's judgment against sin. In Jesus' death the power of sin and death has been destroyed now and forever!

He is Risen!

He is risen indeed. Alleluia.