

Title: “What Did You Expect?”

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Luke 3:21-22

1/12/2025

Service Readings: Isaiah 43:1–7; Rom. 6:1–11; Luke 3:15–22

Misguided expectations about our baptism, and Jesus’ baptism obstruct our response to God’s work. We are reminded that a life lived in the reality of baptism is one that continues to be dependent on God’s grace and mercy towards us.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

“What, exactly, were you expecting,” the pastor asked? The young couple looked at him in silence for they were taken aback by what he had just asked. “What... What do you mean, ‘what were we expecting?’ Isn’t it obvious? Isn’t it the same thing that everyone expects when they get their child baptized? We bring our daughter in, you pour water on her head, say a few words, the family takes a bunch of pictures, and then we host a party. What more is there?”

Now it was the pastor’s turn for stunned silence. But not because their reply shocked him, but because their reply was becoming more and more common these days, and for whatever reason, today was the day when he began to feel the real weight of that reality. He paused long enough to plead with the Holy Spirit to place the right words in his mouth. And then he spoke.

“Yes, there will be all that – water, words, family, pictures, and a party, but there is a richness in all of this that I think you are missing. Are you interested in exploring that with me?” They answered in the affirmative because even though they were doing this just for her parents, they also had a sense that there must be some greater meaning than just tradition or ritual and they were curious what that might be. “Good,” he replied. “Let’s start with a question. If you were to set the ritual, the family gathering, and even the party aside for a moment, could you think of reasons why your parents value the baptism of your child?”

“Well,” she started, “besides the fact that we have always done it – even I was baptized, and the fact that the whole family looks forward to getting together on special occasions, I guess it is to guarantee that my baby is protected from sin for the rest of her life and that we know she will be able to go to heaven.”

“OK,” the pastor replied in a calm, even tone. He was not interested in correcting her just yet and so he continued on. “What does it mean to be protected from sin?” “Oh, that’s an easy one. When she is baptized, God takes away all her sin – every last one that she will ever commit. And so, because she is sinless, she will go to heaven.”

“How might that happen, do you suppose? How *does* God take away her sin in baptism?” She thought about that for a moment and replied in the form of a question, “I guess he just forgives her, maybe?”

The pastor figured he had interrogated her enough and didn’t want to push his luck and so he paused for a moment and then asked if they would be interested in hearing what the church taught about baptism. They were, and so he walked over to where his books sat, on an aging bookcase that was many years his senior and his eyes scrolled across the sagging shelves searching for one specific book. He found it and brought it back to his desk and as he opened it, he explained to them that what he held in his hand was a book Martin

Luther authored to teach families about several topics, including baptism. And he began to read from the appropriate section:

"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."*

He closed the book and summarized what he had just read. "Through baptism, your sins are forgiven and eternal salvation is promised to all who believe, but baptism is more than just water – it is water mixed with the power of God's Word. And through that word, by faith, these benefits are made available to those who receive this means of God's grace."

He could tell that they were interested and so he continued. "Now, this answers the what question and even some of the how, and if we stop here you can probably begin to understand why your parents are so interested in their grandchild being baptized. But as you understand even more of the how, the richness and depth of what God is doing becomes all the more glorious. I'd like to read to you something from the Bible. As he opened his to Luke, he explained who John the Baptist was and why he was in the desert. And then he read:

¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire ... ²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

You see, before Jesus, the baptism that John performed was one of repentance. It was to cleanse people from their sins and make them ready to meet the Messiah. And as important as that was, it was nothing more. And so, when Jesus arrives, John pushes back because it doesn't make sense that he would baptize Jesus to prepare Jesus *for* Jesus. See what I mean? But what Jesus was doing at this moment was not preparing for his own coming but was instead taking the place of humanity to eventually receive the full wrath of God's judgement for all of our sins. In that moment he began to stand in solidarity with all of us, not *as* a sinner, but *alongside* us sinners, so that he could do on the cross what we could to do – make atonement for our sins.

That was John's baptism. The one that we perform today is even greater than his. Jesus' baptism revealed to us his true mission and his true identity; *our* baptism reveals our identity – one that is anchored in Christ. In this sacrament, God acts decisively to claim us as his own. He puts our old sinful selves to death and raises them up in Christ. And since we are in Christ, since our identity is found *in him*, it makes sense that our sins are forgiven – Jesus endured God's judgement for them, so they have been atoned for, paid for, and God remembers them no more. You see, *this* is what baptism is all about."

The young couple sat silent for a moment, absorbing all that the pastor told them. They didn't fully understand all of it, but they now understood that there is so much more, so much deeper to baptism and

Jesus than they had ever thought possible. Their hearts began to open as they contemplated all of this, and what it might mean for them and for their daughter. After a moment, she asked him a question.

“So, is baptism just a one-time thing, something that is done only once? It seems too important to just do once.”

The pastor smiled as his heart leapt with joy. “What a wonderful question,” he exclaimed! “What a wonderful, insightful question! It’s true that baptism happens only once, but you should not think of it as a single event. It is really the beginning of a lifelong identity. It is something that we return to daily as we mature in our faith. Remember Martin Luther? He once said this:

Daily significance of Baptism:

- *"It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."*

What he’s saying is that daily we should turn to our baptism and remember that in that moment, God put to death our sinful identity and raised a new one in Jesus. And we should live life in that reality – live as though we are adopted children of God... because we are!

The couple sat there for some time and then, almost apologetically, asked how they might learn more about baptism, Jesus, and God, for they understood that there was so much more to all of it than what they had ever imagined.

And this morning, I pray that you do, too.

Please pray with me.

Thank You for the gift of baptism, where You claim us as Your own and unite us with Christ. Help us to live daily in the reality of this grace, repenting of sin and rising to new life in Him. Strengthen our faith and remind us always of Your promises, that we may trust in Your love and share it with others.

Amen.