

“The Third Thing”

When I teach kids about baptism, we talk about water and I ask them to name 3 things that water does.

They can usually figure out 2 of the 3.

1. Water sustains life. If you don't water a plant, what happens? It dies.
And we talk about how in the water of baptism we are given new life in Christ.
2. Water cleanses. If something gets dirty, water washes the dirt away.
And we talk about how the water of baptism washes away our sin.

Those are basically the things that John's baptism accomplished.

1. It allowed a Gentile to convert to Judaism, beginning a new life as part of God's chosen people; and
2. It cleansed people from ritual or spiritual impurity.

And those are also the things that we as Lutherans believe about baptism: that

1. We are given new life as we are born into Christ's family, and
2. We are forgiven, cleansed from all our sin.

So our beliefs about baptism are actually pretty similar to those of John.

And yet, what are the differences between John's practice of baptism and ours?

1. John practiced immersion baptism – while we only require a few drops of water.

What's good about our practice?

It's easier, neater.

What are we missing out on?

The whole symbolism of being buried with Christ by baptism into his death and being raised to new life in him.

The experiential dimension that goes beyond a theological concept, and involves one's whole self – body, mind, heart and soul.

2. John baptized adults – people who chose to be baptized – while we practice infant baptism.

What's good about our practice?

It puts the emphasis on God's action, not ours, and reminds us that we don't have to do anything to earn God's grace

What are we missing out on?

Being able to experience and process and be transformed by the event.

Jesus was pushed down into the water and held there, ready to be swallowed up by death, before being raised to new life and seeing the heavens opened and the Spirit descend on him and hearing God's words of assurance and love.

While I don't disagree with our Lutheran theology of baptism as a ritual by which we receive new life and forgiveness,

I wonder if maybe being totally immersed as an adult like Jesus was might actually have a greater chance of being a life-transforming experience than having a few drops of water sprinkled on our infant foreheads.

And yet even John's baptism left something to be desired according to John himself.

¹¹ *I...baptize you in water...but One who...is more powerful than I...will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire”*

And that's when we get to that third use of water:

water sustains life, water cleanses, and...? [think Niagara Falls]...water provides power.

So DID Jesus baptize? Not that we know of.

He preached and taught, and he healed and performed miracles, but he didn't baptize.

And the only time he talked about baptism was as a metaphor for death.

He didn't baptize until after the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension,

and then he did exactly what John had prophesied: he baptized with the Holy Spirit and with Power!

We don't know if the disciples were baptized by water,

but we do know that on Pentecost they were baptized with the Holy Spirit and with Power,

a power that transformed them from being followers who were completely ineffectual
to being leaders who changed the world.

Yes, baptism is about new life and forgiveness, but if that's all that it is, then it is only like John's baptism,
and according to John, that's nothing compared to baptism into Christ which confers the power of the Spirit.

Being baptized is like being given the gift of a brand new sports car.

We can unlock the door and get inside and enjoy being in the interior.

We can put the key in the ignition and hear the motor kick on and watch as the dashboard lights up.

But if that's all we do, we're missing out on the point of the gift.

If we want to use the gift for what it was intended, we can't just sit there.

We need to put the car in gear and put our foot on the accelerator and GO!

When they were baptized by the Holy Spirit and by fire, those first disciples were completely changed.
And the power that God gave them changed the entire world.

That power is still available to you and to me.

It's the power that began Salem and has kept it going for 130 years.

It's the power that gave the members in the 1950s the faith and courage
to give up their old way of life, sell their building, move,
build a new building and live in a whole new way.

It's the power that has been with us the whole 8 years I have been here as your pastor.

When I came to Salem I was told we only had enough money to survive 5 more years. That was 8 years ago.

When I came to Salem, the projected budget deficit was \$70,000.

Three months later I was told there was going to be an additional \$30,000 deficit.

I said, "If we do what God calls us to do, God will continue to provide all we need to do it."

Two days later a church called asking to rent our building and offering to pay \$30,000.

When I came to Salem the endowment was \$600,000 and every year I've been here we've had a budget deficit
-\$70,000, \$60,000, \$40,000, \$30,000- & miraculously up until recently the endowment was still \$600,000.
My friends, those numbers are nothing less than miraculous. Our financial story proclaims God's power & love.

No matter what challenges we face, we are more than conquerors through the One who loves us.

The message of the gospel is that God CAN answer our prayers because of God's power
and God WILL answer our prayers because of God's love.

Despite our sins, despite our failings, despite our foibles, God loves each and every one of us.

The God in whose name we are baptized remains ready and willing
to forgive every sin, repair every relationship, and heal every hurt.

The God in whose name we are baptized is ready to pour out the Spirit on us,
filling our hearts with love, our souls with peace, and our spirits with joy.

The God in whose name we are baptized is ready to fill us with the power and love of Christ,
a power that will not only change our lives but that can change the world.

May we open our lives to that power right here, right now! Amen