

A Sermon on the Christian Life for the Season of Epiphany

A Lutheran woman has written an account of becoming a born-again Christian. She asks: "What does this mean?" She answers: "It means there was a point in my life where I came to the understanding that I had really offended God and that there were two ways it could go. Either through my repentance, belief, and trust in Jesus's blood, that he paid the fine for me, or through my entry into hell."

She continues: "It is important for me to try always to put him first, to think of spiritual issues, to repent of my sins daily, and to read the Bible." She asks: "Shouldn't everyone have an idea of when they were converted?" She had heard a pastor say: "If you don't have a conversion experience, maybe you don't have a conversion." The pastor said there should be a marked change in someone. It should be noticeable even if the change is gradual.

She writes about infant baptism: "It's just a ceremony like confirmation. There has to be some kind of conversion on the part of the person, some willingness to conform your life to Christ. Baptism doesn't mean you're bound for heaven."

She writes also about faith: She says faith is "a gift from God but we have to receive it, reach for it, and there has to be some kind of fruit." And: "Salvation is like a life-preserver but you have to grab for it, reach for it, and that it's no good otherwise."

Her account is a good illustration of what the dilemmas of salvation are all about. What the Bible is about? What is salvation about?

It's summed up in three major arenas: What is sin? What is faith? What is the Word?

First, what is sin? The Evil One is quite clever. We mistakenly think we can see him – a red devil with pointed ears and a pitchfork. C. S. Lewis, in his famous book, *Screwtape Letters*, describes how the Evil One sneaks in, and he doesn't care if you commit big sins. He just wants you to get caught. He tempts us to think that we can identify sins, we can know what sins are. That's a real temptation.

In fact, sin is in the singular. Sin is a condition we all have. We think we just have to try harder to avoid sin, but then we fall more and more into what sin is really about, which is spiritual pride.

It's good we don't have a baptism today because it's hard to talk about what baptism is about when a tiny baby is here at the font. What we always point out is that little one is going to die. The symptom of what sin is is death. We have a hard time realizing that sin and death are the same thing.

But that sin and death are the same is explicit in scripture. In Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death." 1 Cor 15:56 Paul writes that the cause of death is sin, as he says: "The sting of death is sin." 1 Cor 15:26: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

We have the false idea that death is just one of those things, when, as a matter of fact, death is what sin is about, and it's from the very beginning that we are caught in sin and therefore death.

As Luther often reminds us, quoting Isa 64:6: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags." We think we do some bad things, but we do some good things, too. But all our good deeds are filthy rags, as well. What does that do to our situation?!

Second: What is faith?

We are misled in modern culture because it sees faith as a psychological thing. We think there is some little spark of goodness or "goodness" in us. Therefore we think faith is something about a dialogue between God and us, or a decision by us for God.

We are also caught by certain metaphors, as you can tell by this woman's account. We argue from these metaphors. The one she uses is the life-preserver. She mentions the Biblical term, that faith is a gift (Rom 3:24). Remember how the woman writes that the life-preserver is no good unless you grab it. The gift is no good unless you "receive" it. And so we go astray. We take these image in the wrong way.

Most striking is the imagery in the hymn, *Rock of Ages*: "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." These words, the beginning of the third verse, start out right, but then there's a problem. We have the idea that faith is that desperation where we are hanging on to a rope, and finally we come to the end and hang on even more tightly.

In fact, we let go of that rope, and what the Lord does is snatch us. Luther in his great Commentary on Galatians, uses that image (*Luther's Works* 26:387):

"This is the reason our theology is certain: It **snatches us** away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God which cannot deceive."

Luther also uses this image in his Large Catechism: "Thus we see what a great and excellent thing Baptism is, which **snatches us** from the jaws of the devil and makes us God's own" (Large Catechism, Part IV, Baptism, 83; *Book of Concord*, Tappert: 446; Kolb/Wengert 466).

The Lord snatches us because basically sin is rebellion against God. This isn't something where even in a small way we want to work with God. No, we want to be Lord in our own lives, and the mercy of God is that he comes from outside of us, in spite of us, and grabs us.

The woman writing about being born again says that conversion has to produce some kind of effect. There are places in the Bible that talk about good works: "By their fruit you shall know them" (Matt 7:16). Or "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

The real question about good works or bearing fruit is about salvation itself. If you are going to say that we have to do good works, then the question arises: "When have I done enough? When have I done it sincerely and really?" We're caught.

The Evil One, just as he tempts us saying: "You can sort out sin," also tempts us into saying: "Now this is good and that is evil." We then lose what faith is about. It is about what God does. Faith is a way of describing the hiddenness of what God does. Paul speaks to this in 1 Cor 4:3-4, when his accusers come to him and say: "Show us in your life," and then he writes: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. God alone judges." It's the hiddenness of what faith is about.

Third: The Word. What does Baptism do? How does it work? Remember the woman who reports being born again said that Baptism is just a ceremony in which the child is dedicated to God. Paul in Romans 10:17 speaks directly to "born againism." He writes: "Faith comes by hearing. And hearing comes by the preaching of Christ." Hearing is reversed. In salvation hearing is not something we do but what God does in us. Hearing is that which the preaching of Christ produces. As Paul writes: "The Word of the cross is the power of salvation" (1 Cor 1:18).

What then about having to be born again? John 3:3 says you have to be born again. Some translations say: "born anew," or "born from above."

John 3:5 says specifically what John 3:3 is about. In John 3:5 it says you have to be born of water and the Spirit. That's what Baptism is. It is God's doing. To be born again or born anew is not about having a conversion experience, naming a time when something dramatic happened to you, or making a decision for Christ.

What it's really about is the power of the Word. It is the Word of God which produces what God is doing. It's effective because it's God work and his way of working. It's the Word of the cross.

Again, the Evil One sneaks in and says: "If you can't feel it, and you can't see it, and if you don't make it happen, then it's not real."

It's the whole question about what sin, faith, and the Word are about. It's only the cross that tells us what sin is. The cross points out that sin is something we can't handle and God alone handled.

The cross tells us what faith is about. The cross is what we cannot do. But thank God, he did it. And finally the Word of the cross is that Word that comes to us, and he comes to us in concrete ways.

It's not the water in Baptism and the bread and wine in Communion by themselves, but it is the Word and his Word does what he promises. God's promises are true in contrast to all other promises. This is what we live by, and it's very different from what is commonly thought, namely, that you have to do it, and you have to see it.

Again, Luther in his great Commentary on Galatians addresses this confusion. He points out that the Roman Catholic way of thinking and the Baptist way of thinking appear to be different, but really they both teach you have to do it and see it. Luther writes:

“These wolves are joined at the tail, even though they have different heads. They pretend to be fierce enemies publicly; but inwardly they actually believe, teach, and defend the same doctrine, in opposition to Christ, the only Savior, who is our only righteousness” (*LW 27:149*).

Christ, the only Savior, our only righteousness. This is the Word of the cross. This is the way the Lord has snatched us from the jaws of the devil and made us his own. Amen