

“Certainly” means “certainty”

A sermon on Baptism for the Season of Epiphany

2 Kings 5:1-14; Romans 6:5

After we have celebrated a Baptism, we ask ourselves: “What did we do?” It didn’t take very long. Only a few minutes. There was speaking and a candle.

In the Small Catechism Luther asks: “How can water do such great things?” That’s why this account in 2 Kings about this General in Syria is so useful here. It’s important to remember how Naaman had leprosy. That was a terrible disease. He was the Commanding General of the Army, and there was nothing he could do about it. But Naaman’s wife had a little slave girl from Israel, and she said to her mistress: “Why don’t they go to the prophet in Israel? He could heal him.”

Naaman went to the king of Syria and said: “Give me permission to go.” He took a gift of about \$10,000 and went to the king of Israel and said: “Heal me.” And the King of Israel said: “I don’t know how to do that. You’re just trying to make trouble.”

But fortunately one of the servants of the King of Israel said: “There’s Elisha down the road. He can do that.”

Naaman took his gift and his entourage and went down to see Elisha, but Elisha sent his servant to meet Naaman and the servant said: “Go to the River Jordan and dip yourself seven times.” Naaman got mad! “What in the world? If Elisha had come himself and waved his hand over me or something.” Naaman thought: “Don’t we have good rivers in Syria, just as good as here?”

But fortunately one of Naaman’s servants said to him: “If he had asked you to do some big thing, you would have done it, so why not go?” Naaman went and he did this and he was healed.

We may at first say about Baptism: “It’s not very much; it’s not very long; it’s sort of trivial.” We know that sometimes a baby in an incubator is baptized with just a drop or two of water because that is all that can be done. Yet if you are in the Russian Orthodox Church, the baby is dunked nine times, three times for each member of the Trinity! And some Baptists have big pools in their sanctuaries for Baptism.

But it is not a matter of being a big thing or a little thing; what matters is that the Lord is doing this.

Another thing that is important is that one's Baptism is an important day. We all know our birthdays. It is sometimes said: "Your birthday is the first day of the rest of your life!"

But what happens in Baptism is that this is the first day of living together forever in the Lord. It's really far more important than the day you were born in the usual way. This is the beginning of the gift of faith, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of being adopted as a son or daughter of the Lord, and the gift of being in him forever.

We generally don't realize that sin and death are the same thing. When we talk about Baptism, we're talking about death and what this means and how we look at it and how Baptism in the Lord is what it's about, to have life forever.

How does the Lord do it? He does it with his Word. You remember the first chapter of Genesis; it says: "He spoke and it was done." The same is true in the storm in Mark 4:35-41. The disciples thought they were going to drown, and Jesus spoke to the storm and said: "Peace, be still!" And the storm stopped. Or at the door of the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus said: "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43), and he came out.

That is spelled out in Isaiah 55:11, which says: "My Word . . . shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it." And finally in John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

How does that apply to us here and now? It comes to us here and now and it's specifically spelled out in Romans 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ." It is that which God does to us, not something we do, not even saying: "He gives, but you have to receive the gift." No, he's the one who does it because that's what it means for him to be Lord.

There are two things that go with this. The first has to do with Mark 10. Jesus was blessing little children and then he gave this command: "Unless you become like a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mark 10:15). Therefore adult baptism is simply deferred infant Baptism. What it is really about is that the Lord does it and we don't.

Then there's the Lord's command at the end of the Gospel of Matthew: "Go into all the world . . . baptize . . . and teach" (Matt 28:19-20).

But then there's the key promise in Romans 6:5: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." The key word is "certainly." (The Greek idiom requires the word "certainly.") What's

different about God's promise is that when the Lord makes a promise, that's what happens.

Once again: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, which is referring here to baptism, then we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5).

(Luther: "Finally, we are not primarily concerned whether the baptized person believes or not, for in the latter case Baptism does not become invalid. Everything depends upon the Word and commandment of God. This, perhaps, is a rather subtle point, but it is based upon what I have already said, that Baptism is simply water and God's Word in and with each other; that is, when the Word accompanies the water Baptism is valid even though faith be lacking. For my faith does not constitute Baptism but receives it. Baptism does not become invalid even if it is wrongly received or used, for it is bound not to our faith but to the Word . . . As we said, even if infants did not believe—which, however, is not the case, as we have proved—still their Baptism would be valid and no one should rebaptize them." [LC Part 4: Infant Baptism, 52-53, 55] Tappert)

What about all those people who aren't baptized? In the United States about 40% of the people are outside of the Christian church. We are a mission country. This is a real problem. We say: "They do their thing and we do ours." What do we say to this?

There are three things that we say.

The first is: We have to point out for those who are not baptized, there is no promise, no certainty. We can't say the certainty is there because the promise goes with doing what the Lord has commanded. For the unbaptized, there's no certainty.

The second thing we say is: "That's the Lord's problem, not our problem."

The third thing is that we continually fall into the problem of saying: "But he has to do it this way!" Or: "He has to do it that way!" We end up trying to manipulate the Lord by saying: "Well, of course, Baptism doesn't matter. It's just a trivial thing." Or: "It's all ritual; just religious talk." We try to manipulate and manage the Lord.

Our response to that kind of thinking is: "We leave that up to the Lord," but we cannot imply that it doesn't matter.

Hebrews 3:2: "How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" It goes on to say: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). That's about the importance and the seriousness of what salvation is about.

Finally, the question of salvation is summed up in the question: "What is really real and what is happening in life?" Is there a real God? Is God really real? That's really what it's about. Is this important, or is it one of those things that like insurance, just for safe-keeping, we'll do this, we'll baptize this child, but who knows? What's important is . . . ", and then we go on to follow the gods of this world.

The real question is: Is there a true God? And who is this God?

We have in him a sure hope, a "living hope" (1 Peter 1:3). That's over against any kind of hope we make up for ourselves. As someone has said: "Let God be true and every man be false" because, after all, what we're really talking about is death and eternity. We let that slide and say: "We'll deal with that when we get there."

But for those of us who have been baptized, we have this remarkable promise: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). Amen