

How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

Mark 1:21-28 (Hebrews 2:3)

A sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

This is the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany; it is also the Sunday before February 2nd, the Festival of Candlemas, which marks the presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:22-24). This is the Mass in which you start to have fewer candles because the light is coming back.

It is a good day for us to remember our Baptism and what it's about. For those of us who come out of the great Protestant tradition there is a lot of confusion within our circles. That is to say we have a lot of misunderstandings. Some of it is simply a lack of knowledge.

A common way that people misunderstand this is by thinking of Baptism as initiation. In this view Baptism is understood as a parallel to circumcision. That was the way someone entered the covenant, became part of the people of God, part of the family. The understanding was that you would become more of the family as you grew up. It is fascinating because it then seems to work with developmental psychology. It will be more or better of what it should be, but there has to be a start, sort of a kickstart, and Baptism is that kickstart.

Over against that is the basic understanding that in Baptism one becomes a child of God, receives the Holy Spirit, receives faith, and there is not degree or quantity to the Holy Spirit or to life in Christ. One is what one is. In this basic understanding Lutherans and Roman Catholics are more similar than different.

The word sometimes used to speak of this is "regeneration." One is truly regenerated. It isn't that one is "going to be" or becomes more. That's it.

How does this happen? This is another way of asking: How does it work? How is the Lord working? It really has to do with what sin is about.

Still common in our culture is the myth of the blank slate, the primitive gentle savage, the innocent one. Later along comes something called sin. But that is simply not what sin is about. This myth of the blank slate is very much in our culture and we need to realize that.

There is also the idea that sin is only sin when it's personal. Until you are making decisions, it's not sin. We just noted that Lutherans and Catholics agree that Baptism is a sacrament, that in Baptism one truly becomes a child of God. While this is true, it is also true that Lutherans and Catholics disagree on whether sin can't be sin until it's personal. Catholics hold that sin isn't sin until it's personal, but we Lutherans hold that sin is transpersonal. The evil one is the personal force that makes sin happen, and it doesn't have to do with some intellectual decision until we have sin.

When we talk about sin, we remember what Paul writes in Romans 3:10-18 that all are under the power of sin:

“No one is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one.’ Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive.’ The venom of asps is under their lips.’ Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.’ . . . There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

All have sinned. He doesn't say: "All have sinned except the little ones; they don't sin until they are old enough."

There is also Isaiah 64:6: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags." Even the good things we do are caught in sin because sin is a power that grabs us. That's why this is such a serious matter.

Once again what we're really talking about is what the cross is about. That is to say the cross tells us that we are all lost. There is nothing we can do, and thank God, he has handled it and handled it his way. Otherwise, what we do is diminish the cross, that is, imply that it wasn't quite necessary for everybody in the same way.

What this helps us see is that infant Baptism is a perfect description of how God works. The child doesn't know what is happening. God is doing it, and it's happening because of what his word is. He makes his promises and they don't fail.

Infant Baptism has three huge implications for the Bible, sacraments, and other religions.

First of all, for the Bible. In 1 Peter 3:21 it says baptism saves you. But it does come down to the question of how one uses the Bible. One can talk about the fact that there was infant Baptism in the first century because there were house churches. Most important, and this is the thing that those who oppose infant Baptism have not been dealing with, is that there is no evidence of adult Baptism of those who were Christian either well into the Second Century. The argument from silence cuts several ways.

In the second place, it has to do with what we talk about when we talk about sacraments. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we know in the traditions that are called Baptist and evangelical, celebrating the Lord's Supper is very infrequent. It's not called a sacrament; it's called an ordinance, a rule, something to do. In a similar way, modern evangelical churches do not have infant Baptism; rather, they often have "a dedication service" for an infant in which the parents dedicate the child to God and dedicate themselves to raising the child in the Christian faith.

While there are obvious similarities to infant Baptism, the whole basic sense of how God works and wants us to relate to him is different. In an evangelical "dedication service" it is

not that the Word of God does this and that's it. There is always something more, something added that must be done in response to make salvation work. And that has to do then with the certainty of salvation and the freedom we have because that is lost when salvation depends on us and our response.

Finally, then about other religions or those who haven't been baptized? What about emergency Baptisms? Why do we do that? We do it because that is the promise. The promise is that those who are baptized are in him. As Paul writes in Romans 6:5: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." We take Baptism very seriously because that is where we have the promise, where we are certain.

Now to those who are not baptized, that also includes the question about other religions, that's the question of evil. That's the question of our judging God. It is basically answered by saying: "That's God's problem, not mine."

It doesn't mean we aren't concerned about mission. But it does mean that we don't say: "What matters is doing good and making a decision for Christ."

To the contrary, it is properly said that adult Baptism is simply delayed infant Baptism because it is what God does and not what we do that matters. Thank God because we have that confidence and security in him.

Therefore it is proper to conclude with a verse that is in the Book of Hebrews, Hebrews 2:3: "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?"

This is that great promise God gives to us. We have this treasure we can depend on. Amen