

From “no hope” to “a living hope”

Ephesians 2:11-22

A Sermon for the Nineth Sunday after Pentecost

Many years ago, in the weeks after a baby was born, people would ask: “Has the child been done?” By which they meant: “Has the baby been baptized?”

That question, “Has the baby been done?” strikes us as old-fashioned, but it’s right about the main thing. There are three basics to the main thing.

The first of the basics is: What has God done? What God has done is summarized in the Apostles’ Creed or more usefully in the Nicene Creed, which is the far more universal creed among Christians.

What does the Nicene Creed say? The Creed says there was a problem, which is described in the Psalm for today, the Twenty-Third Psalm, particularly in verse 4: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. . . .” As you know, there’s a footnote there that says that in Hebrew it doesn’t only mean “the valley of the shadow of death.” It means the valley of deep darkness. And that includes, of course, death, but it includes all the problems of this world: tragedies, horrors, depression, loneliness, emptiness, meaninglessness. Whatever the problem is included in Psalm 23:4. Even though I walk through the valley of shadows, I fear no evil because he is with me.

In the Great Shepherd chapter in the New Testament, it says three times: “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11, 15, 17). This is no different from what is said in the Nicene Creed or in John 1:14: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father.” The God who made everything came to this particular planet and at a certain time, about 2,000 years ago, and this particular person died and rose again for you and me because there was a problem and he solved it.

That is stated very specifically then in Romans 14:9: “For this reason Jesus Christ died and rose again that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.” That’s number one, the basic point. You may say: “That’s really a general idea of love.” But no. Our confession is: This is not a general idea about love or God or goodness. Rather, this is the key event that changes everything, and if that is not our confession, then we’re are just playing church.

Basic to all is what we have confessed about what God has done. This is why we do what we do. In that confession, the Nicene Creed, it says: “One baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” This is echoing Ephesians 4:5-6: “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.”

Number two is: Is everybody saved? Do we have God figured out? We all know that there are many religions, everybody has a point of view, wanting a God who suits them, and there's evil. The problem of: "Is everybody saved?" is not only lurking, but overpowering among us, without thinking of why this can't be: It can't be because if everybody is saved, then there's no justice. It's as if at the end of history God brings down the curtain and in spite of forty million killed here and a hundred million killed there, he says: "Wasn't that interesting?!" If everybody is saved, then there's no justice in the face of all the evil of this world.

What does the Bible say? On the one hand, Matthew 25:46 says some "will go to eternal punishment." And Matthew 7:13: "The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction and those who enter by it are many." On the other hand, Romans 11:32 says: "For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all." And Romans 5:18: "One man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all." This problem is not to be solved by dueling Bible passages.

What is it about? It's about God handling it his way. It doesn't mean that we can say, as many do: "Well I know that really everybody is saved." Or: "I know that really most are damned."

No, it means **really** leaving it up to God because it's his problem, and he has solved it his way. As it says in Colossians 1:20: ". . . making peace by the blood of his cross," and in Ephesians 2:14: "He [Christ] is our peace." That's his way of solving it.

This is why we make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the one being baptized because that is basic to what God has done and is doing his way.

Then in the third place, we're doing this as not as "a thing to do," but our confession as Christians is: This is life insurance. You and I know that when we buy life insurance it is really death insurance. But no, what we are doing in a Baptism is life insurance. We're doing something that is not just at the beginning of a child's life. (Sometimes we baptize adults.) This is forever, and that's what it is about.

The real question for all of us, all the time is: What about forever? We have here that which is life insurance. God's magic and that's what makes the difference.

We have in the first three chapters of Ephesians a description of this: He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, in him, in Christ, before the foundation of the world but now in Baptism. And so, it says in Ephesians 1:13-14: You were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. It is that stamp which remains, like being branded. You are sealed forever. That is based on what God has done in Jesus Christ when he came and died and rose again. This was not some dippy-do in which he came down for thirty years and then went up. Rather, he is the one who remains both God and man forever. Being baptized in him means you

are adopted. You are made a son or daughter forever. You are no longer a stranger, an outsider, a slave. As Ephesians 2:19 says: "You are no longer strangers, sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." That's what God in Christ has done, as Paul writes 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."

What then is the final point about all this? It's like the couple whose young daughter became quite ill with a rare brain tumor. They took her to one specialist after another, but all declined to operate. They lost hope and began to plan accordingly. But then someone referred them to a doctor who specialized in this particular kind of brain surgery. He agreed to take their daughter as his patient. He operated, and it was successful. Instead of losing their daughter, she was restored to them. They were overcome with relief and joy. He had given them this great gift!

We rejoice in every Baptism, the greatest of gifts. As Ephesians 2:12 says: Once we were lost and "strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in this world." But now, we have a "living hope" (1 Peter 1:3) because of what the Lord has done. And those who have been baptized into his death and resurrection "have been done." We have been made us his own sons and daughters, "citizens of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19), and we thank him and rejoice. Amen