

## Is he the one?

Isaiah 43:1; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

A Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany

How long can a person live without water? On average a person can survive without water only about three days.

We know the problem of water shortages and droughts. (Perhaps some examples.) In Isaiah 44:3 the Lord says: "I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground."

And the problem of floods and too much water. (Perhaps some examples.) Genesis 7 tells the story of the flood which lasted forty days.

We can have too little and too much water. Both are big problems.

There's the problem of impure or contaminated water. We need water, clean pure water, to live.

If we use water as a metaphor for the Gospel, we could say that atheists are those who say: "You don't need water. You just think you need water, but you really don't. It's all in your head. The remnant of a bygone era. The Bible, prayer, and God are part of old-world thinking when people didn't know much about life. Now science tells us that all your thoughts and feelings are a matter of brain chemistry. And science is "it." Science is the ultimate judge of Truth with a capital T.

One could say that atheists and two-year-olds have this in common: They are confident that their wisdom is vast, and they can handle what comes.

Contrast the atheist's confidence with the enormity of who God is. In the Book of Job, Job wonders why? Why this world? Why all his suffering? And the Lord says: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world? Were you there?" (Job 38:4)

Or Romans 9:19-21, citing Isaiah 29:16: Does the clay says to the one making pots: "Why have you done this? You have to do it my way. You have to do it the way I want."

There is something ridiculous about finding fault with God. Lord, you should do this, and you should do that. No wonder it says that the Lord laughs in derision (Ps 2:4).

This brings us to religion, salvation, and the Bible. The Bible is a book about life and death and God. It's not right to make it into a book of secular history and science.

What about religion and salvation? A lot of people think that religion is about is doing good and having good intentions. They presume that good is rewarded and evil is punished, and that's the way it works out, and that must be the way it is because that's the way they see it.

Over against this kind of thinking is the Christian message: The cross is that which tells us what the problem is. It is so great that only this is the answer. It doesn't have to do with good works. It is answered by what God does through Jesus Christ on the cross.

This is an entirely different message. It doesn't say as people often do: "Well, a few good works don't do any harm. Just in case." Or: "True religion has to be a matter of how I live and my good works and my good intentions."

Over against that is the message of the cross which tells us about God's holiness and about how desperate the problem of sin and death is.

Every time we try to say something different, what we are really doing is we are diminishing the cross.

What we have here is an "either/or" between the general kind of thinking that is prevalent among us and the Christian message.

The New Testament message is foreshadowed in the Old. In Luke 3:22 the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus as a dove, and a voice comes from heaven announcing: "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." Some ancient manuscripts here say: "Today I have begotten you."

This may not ring bells for us, but in the First Century everyone standing around would perk up their ears, knowing that this is a citation from Psalm 2:7: "You are my son. Today I have begotten you." Our Old Testament lesson for today is similar. Isaiah 43:1: "I have called you by name, you are mine."

He is the one. He is not another prophet.

But what does that mean to say he is the one? Was he a revealer, not fully God? (John 1:18?). Less than God? "The Father is greater than I" (John 14:28)? Equal to God (Luke 3:22)?

The early Christians debated and struggled. What was he about? What was it all about?

Finally, in 325 A.D., spurred by these controversies, the church hammered out the Nicene Creed: ". . . one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father."

That's who he is and what he is about.

What then about us?

We know from John the Baptist that prior to Jesus' coming, the people had known of ritual washings to be done at certain times, such as after touching certain animals or before worship or in other such situations, but those ritual washings were repeated.

In the New Testament comes something entirely different. It's the message that comes in Romans 6:5: "If we have been united with him in a death like his (Baptism), we shall **certainly** be united with him in a resurrection like his."

The water with the Word (and the Word is Christ himself) is that which makes the difference. It is not repeated. It's one and done. The terrible problem of sin and death has been taken care of.

This is why infant Baptism is the perfect example of the Gospel. Salvation is not a matter of believing the right "doctrines" or trusting "from the heart." Rather, both faith itself and eternal life are gifts, given in Baptism. Baptism saves regardless of whether the one being baptized is a tiny infant unaware of what's going on or an alert adult.

Luther:

"Further, 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."<sup>1</sup>

Baptism saves. As Luther writes: In Baptism the Lord "snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes us his own."<sup>2</sup> Thank God it is up to him and what he does, and not us.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Large Catechism, Part 4, Baptism, 52-53 (Tappert 443; Kolb/Wengert 463).

<sup>2</sup> Large Catechism, Part 4, Baptism, 83 (Tappert 446; Kolb/Wengert 466).