

Why do people forget their Baptism?

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Happy Ground Hog Day. We are here on 2nd of February, half way between the 21st of December and the 20th of March. Roughly half way through winter. Will Punxsutawney Phil see his shadow? Will there be six more weeks of winter or not?

In the Roman Catholic tradition this Sunday is also the Festival of Candlemas. It started back in 496 A.D. and marks the time when one celebrates putting out the candles because there is now enough light. The light is growing. There is a rhyme for the Festival of Candlemas, and it goes like this: "If Candlemas Day be fair and bright, winter will have another fight. If Candlemas Day brings cloud and rain, winter won't come again." Very much like Ground Hog Day.

Today, in this season of the coming of the light, we have two beautiful Old Testament texts: Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you," and Psalm 71:6: "Upon thee I have leaned from my birth; thou art he who took me from my mother's womb."

These texts prompt us to think of birth and Baptism. We know our birthday but how many know the date of our Baptism? Why do people forget? Why is this overlooked?

After all, our lives on this earth come to an end, but the day you were baptized is the first day of the rest of your life forever with him.

Why is it that people forget their Baptism? There are three basic reasons:

The first is we don't really believe in miracles. In the movie, *The Princess Bride*, there's sword fight between the Spaniard Inigo Montoya and the masked Man in Black. The Spaniard says to the Man in Black: "Who are you?" The Man in Black answers: "No one of consequence." The Spaniard says: "I must know." The Man in Black answers: "Get used to disappointment." We're there. We're used to disappointment about miracles.

At the same time, we long for miracles. We want to see the Red Sea parted, walking on water, doves descending from heaven, the lame healed, the blind given sight. We want signs and miracles, too. We think such miracles would do it for us.

At the same time, we remember the warning of Matt 16:4: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign (a miracle) but no sign (no miracle) shall be given it except the sign of Jonah."

We know that God died on the cross and rose again, but we don't really believe in the miracle that God did this for me and for you forever.

Third, there is a bigger reason we forget our Baptisms: In our heart of hearts, we believe we are saved by works. We think that when you come down to it, we must have to do

something, and surely, we have to see and decide. We decide what counts as a good work and what doesn't. We think we're pretty smart and that we know. We think we can define and determine what sin is rather than the cross shows us what sin is. It's a problem so horrible that only God could fix it.

There are all kinds of objections to the miracle of baptism.

First, how can that tiny baby be a sinner? That sweet child is uninformed, innocent.

We know that baby will grow up and that someday—many, many long years from now—that person will die. What we have forgotten is that sin equals death equals judgment. They really are all together. They are all one. That fact that we are going to die tells us we are sinners.

Second, we think that though sin is problem, it's not that serious. We're like the murderer on death row who was asked if he was afraid of dying. He said, "It's no problem. I'm just moving to another plane of existence." We expect that we have some godlike nature that automatically goes from one plane of existence to another.

A few years ago, there was an action-adventure video game based on Dante's Inferno. The nine circles of Hell become a kind of game. It's as if you don't need to be serious about sin and eternal separation from God.

How does God work? Luther summed up in the Small Catechism in his explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith. . . ."

We nod, we say yes to that, but we don't really believe it.

What people really believe in is Father, Son, and Holy Church, or Father, Son, and Holy Experience. Always something in which we have a role and control. Rather than: "Wow! The Lord is doing this, and thank the Lord for doing this!"

We can't imagine that Baptism is really it, because if we did, we would be much more alert to what this is when God comes to us in water and the Word.

It says in the Small Catechism that Baptism is not simply water but also the Word. In this which God does, he gives us the Holy Spirit and life forever. This isn't something Luther made up when he sat down to write the Small Catechism. This is found in all kinds of Scripture.

Which brings us back to these beautiful Old Testament verses: Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you," and Psalm 71:6: "Upon thee have I leaned from my birth; thou art he who took me from my mother's womb."

And there are others like this: Isaiah 49:1: “The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name.” Psalm 139:13: “Thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother’s womb.”

And in the New Testament the Lord calls upon us to do this, to baptize in his name. 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.”

And 1 Peter 3:21: “Baptism now saves you.”

1 Corinthians 1:22-24: “For Jews seek signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Luther in the Large Catechism writes: “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.” (LC, Baptism, 4:83).

In this section on Baptism in the Large Catechism Luther raises two basic questions: Where does faith come from? And: Does it matter who does it, who baptizes someone?

About Baptism and faith, he says:

“Baptism does not become invalid depending on whether the person believes or not. Everything depends on the word and commandment of God . . . Baptism is simply water and God’s word in and with each other . . . Baptism is valid even though faith be lacking . . . 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.” (LC, 4:53)

One can find all kinds of things in Scripture about that.

Then he raises the question: Does it matter who does it? (Raising up the ancient question of Donatism.) He writes: “What if a Jew would do the baptizing?” And answers: “It doesn’t matter. The infant’s baptism is valid.” He finally concludes: “Their baptism would be valid and no one should rebaptize them.” (LC 4:55).

There is a congregation which has the tradition of serving a special cake after the worship service on Sundays when someone is baptized. The cake might be chocolate, red velvet, whatever, but the frosting is always white.

The cake serves as an illustration of the Christian life. We live and die, as hymn 294 says, “clothed in his righteousness alone.”

And as it says in 2 Cor 5:21: “He made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

He takes our sin and covers us with his perfect holiness.

That means we are certain, and we’re free. We don’t have to worry about salvation; we are free to get on with day-to-day living.

Two final questions:

First, "Well then, I can sin all I like? It doesn't matter what I do?"

Paul takes this up also in Romans 6. "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" He answers (paraphrase): "By no means! Return to the fleshpots of Egypt? Go back to being a slave to sin when he has bought us our freedom? Good grief, no."

Now that you're free, what are you going to do? Do what's in front of you, whatever is needed. The Lord, after all, is in charge; it doesn't depend on you.

The Lord works with us, in us, and in spite of us. That's the promise of Baptism.

Amen