

Text: I Peter 3: 13-22
Title: *Ich Bin Getauft*
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What do we bring to God?
What do we carry?
What do we offer?
 Our faith?
 Our beliefs and behavior?
 Our character and convictions?

What do we bring to God?
 Our successes in school, business, and finance?
 Our general goodness, kindness, and decency?
 Our hard work?
 A well lived life?

What do we carry?
What do we offer?

At the heart of the Reformation was the question of our relationship to God. 500 years ago, as Martin Luther and other reformers wrestled with the role of the church and the nature of faith, they were reforming, reconfiguring, reimagining, and ultimately revolutionizing the way in which we understood our relationship to God.

One of the flashpoints of that revolution was baptism.
So, this seems like a fine morning to think about baptism, Luther, and us.
In broad strokes....

For the medieval Catholic Church, baptism was the first step in a lifelong process of being saved. Think of it this way: If you were shipwrecked and drowning, baptism was the first plank of a boat to safe harbor. And then came confession, confirmation, communion, etc. And each of these planks (sacraments) was owned and mediated by the church. Throughout the whole process the church (the priest) stood between God and humanity and dispensed the means of the relationship. Therefore, the very water of baptism transmitted God's power. The act of baptism was essential for salvation. And, the requisite faith resided not in the person, but in the church. Saving faith was distributed, often times at some cost, through baptism. It was the first step on the stairway to heaven....

Luther couldn't find this practice supported in scripture, or a reasoned examination of experience and he tweeted back. Here's an example:

...the Papal gang have fabricated the story that young children are baptized without personal faith, namely on the faith of the church, whereupon in and by virtue of the baptism, the little child receives forgiveness of sins and personal faith is poured in with

grace, so that through the water and Holy Spirit it becomes a new-born child. But if one asks them as to the ground of such answer, and where it stands in Scripture, then one finds them in a dark smoke-hole; or they point to their biretta (clerical cap) and say, "We are the most learned doctors, and say it is so; therefore, it is right, and you are not permitted to inquire further," as if all their learning had no other ground than their own dreams and conceit.

Ouch!

As Luther and others began to reform baptism there emerged those who insisted on only a "believers' baptism." They became known as "Anabaptists" because they re-baptized those who had been baptized as infants....

For Anabaptists, the benefits of baptism depended on a personal faith and by that definition infants simply could not have such a faith. The Anabaptists dismantled the mediation of the church. There was no impediment, all that mattered was belief and on the basis of that belief you could be baptized.

As you might imagine this didn't sit well with the church and the Anabaptists were persecuted from all sides. The Holy Roman Empire declared believer's baptism to be subversive, stipulated the death penalty in response, and subsequently thousands of Christians were beheaded, burned at the stake, or drowned. Drownings were a "third baptism" and while Protestants didn't like to use fire, or execute people for heresy (that seemed too Catholic), they made Anabaptism a crime and executed these fellow believers as lawbreakers and not heretics.

Yikes!

What do we bring to God?

What do we carry?

What do we offer?

Our faith?

Our relationship to the church?

Our baptism?

Martin Luther carved a path between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anabaptists. His understanding of the mystery of baptism evolved and bumped into the rails on both sides, but he kept coming back to a couple themes that I think are helpful. So, as we consider this text, reflect on the baptism of beautiful Colette Shalom, and commemorate this anniversary may these themes help shape our relationship with God.

One.

For Peter, for Luther, baptism is nothing less than being dunked into the death of Christ and being raised up in the resurrection of Christ. We might not fully understand how we participate in, or are united with Christ, but we do a disservice to understand baptism as anything less.

There is no magic in the water.

There is no measure of faith that must first be met.

For, in baptism we are signing and sealing something that is already a reality. We are united with Jesus Christ. In John Calvin's language, we are "engrafted into him in order to be free from bondage to death."

And that is nothing of our doing, nothing of our decision, nothing of our deserving. Weak and vulnerable as a baby we belong to the "power" of that resurrection. Listen again to Peter:

.... this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It (baptism) saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

And therefore, dear friends,
no matter what you are struggling with,
no matter what you are running from,
no matter what you are suffering in,
no matter the fluctuations of faith,
there is nothing to fear for you are united with Christ.
Thanks be to God.

Luther puts it this way:

Although you only receive the sacrament of baptism once, you are continually baptized anew by faith, always dying and yet ever living.... The essence of the rite was that grace permeated your whole life, both body and soul; and that it will bring you forth, at the last day clothed in the white robe of immortality. It follows that we never lose the sign of baptism nor its force; indeed, we are continually being re-baptized until we attain completion on the sign of the last day.

Which points to, two....

In a few minutes, the choir will sing a version of Luther's morning prayer. He wrote about daily devotional practices in which he reminded himself of his baptism. In daily repentance, the old would be drowned and the new would come forth to love God and love neighbor. It was a daily practice. Baptism is for life. Every day we live into its completion.

By all accounts, and as is evidenced in his writing, Luther was a colorful-complex-oversized-character. He felt things deeply, he struggled mightily, he worked tirelessly, he knew great appetites and great conflicts, and he was a catalyst at the center of a changing the world.

But, he also confessed to times when the black dog of depression crawled up beside him, he knew the ache and anxiety of doubt, and there were lonely moments of despair. And yet, when he was in the throes of those struggles Luther wrote that he would say to himself: *Ich bin Getauft!* "I am baptized!" And in the reminder that he was united with Christ in life, death, and resurrection he would take encouragement, find sustenance, and feel better.

May we know the same confidence.

Now look. Some are probably nervous that this meditation ties too much to the practice of baptism and neglects the call to grace alone by faith alone. While others take great comfort that as life ebbs and flows baptism is a sure anchor. And some are wondering about what this means for their children who have drifted or flat-out walked away from the faith. And, the truth is, there is no way to adequately grapple with the mystery and nuance of baptism in one sermon.

But, I am reminded that a historian described Luther's understanding of baptism as, "the sacrament of the empty handed." I like that....

What do we bring to God?

What do we carry?

What do we offer?

We come empty handed.

We come as vulnerable and empty handed as Colette Shalom.

And all of this, all of the apparatus of faith: the study of scripture, the community life, the obedience, the loving of neighbor and enemy, the practices of prayer and devotion, the music and liturgy, etc., all of this serves to enrich and strengthen our journey. It is a gift to us. It carries us ~ not the other way around.

And from these gifts we learn again and again that our only hope, our only confidence, our baptism is in Christ alone.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.