

## Foundations of Our Faith: Baptism

Anyone had their car washed this week? This sermon is for you! Perhaps you had good intentions, but time got away from you, or the lines were too long, so you didn't get it done. That's alright. This sermon is for you too. Or maybe you don't believe in paying people to wash your car so you are waiting for spring when you can do it in your driveway and not create icicles. That's fine. This sermon is for you too!

Why do we get our cars washed (and, if I was more tech savvy we would at this very moment have the 70's song 'Car Wash' playing in the background. That's the 1970's for our younger adults.)? We want them clean. It's an investment we want to protect. We want people to think better of us, and we don't want to see some smart-aleck write 'wash me' on the back window.

Now, a car wash washes only part of the car, right? The outside. You can get the inside cleaned too. You can pay more money and use the one that has people who scrub the inside making it seem almost new. Or you can do that yourself, and some people do. You see them at the vacuum machines after they exit the wash. But, if you are like me, getting the outside washed is probably all you do, at least most of the time. I mean, who but my wife is going to look inside

my car, and I am always careful to move all of my trash off of her seat before she gets in. What do you think? Is the car washed if you only wash the outside, or should we define a car wash as cleaning both the inside and outside?

Now those of you who tuned in or came today thinking you were going to hear the first in a series of sermons on The Foundations of Our Faith are wondering, 'where does the Bible talk about car washes?' Ah, glad you asked!

This is the first in a series on The Foundations of Our Faith. If we can focus on the image Amanda selected for the series you will see the theme. The Cross of Christ is central to our faith. Our hope is build on nothing less than (can you finish the lyric?) than Jesus blood and righteousness. That's the idea that underlies the next five weeks...the different ways the Bible teaches us this truth...and it begins with a car wash. Well, it begins with Baptism. Which is like a car wash. Sort of.

All analogies about scripture are fraught with danger. And you can spend your lunch hours figuring out why this analogy is less than perfect, which it is. But, I want us to see that baptism, like a car wash, is the start of getting ourselves clean, made holy, to be presentable in the presence of our Holy God.

**Q&A 67 "Q. Are both the word and the sacraments then intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?"**

**A. Yes!** In the gospel the Holy Spirit teaches us and by the holy sacraments

confirms that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross."

We celebrate two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are acts of worship which Jesus commanded us to observe, so they are holy activities, set apart by God to teach us that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the Cross.

We know that this is the focus of our understanding of the Sacrament of Baptism from lots of places in the Bible. But today I want to look at just two verses. I Peter 3:20-21. So, here is today's sermon, color-coded:

God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and 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 saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ...

What I want to do today is break these two verses down and explain to you why baptism is (and is not) like a car wash. I want to help us see why we make such a big deal about baptism, but only so long as we keep our focus on why baptism is so important, on why baptism teaches us about, and what that means for you and me.

First, we see that the New Testament, which is where we find Peter's letter, is built on the Old Testament, which is where we find Noah's story in Genesis.

The story of Noah and the Ark is one of the Bible's great themes, as well as one of

it's most memorable stories. For purposes of Peter's letter the first thing he wants us to know is that it teaches us how patient God is.

God waited patiently for Noah to build the ark. He gave the people of the world a lot of time to reform their ways. God patiently waits for us to transform our lives too. Remember this: God's love for you is, greater than you can know, and God's desire is that you be with God forever. God is waiting. Patiently. For you and me to get into the Ark. You are invited.

We can understand the church, the universal Church of Jesus Christ, and thus this particular church on 6<sup>th</sup> and Ontario in Sheboygan, as the Ark which Christ is building. Look at the ceiling. You see the hull of the ship, right? The architecture has a sermon in it. God is waiting patiently for the Ark to be filled.

In Noah's day there were only eight people who entered. There is a lesson there too. We should never expect that the world will believe today's prophet's anymore than they believed Noah. God wants it otherwise. That is why we are sent, by the command of Jesus, to go and baptize the nations. The rainbow is a sign which God gives to God's Self that God desire is not that the nations be destroyed but that they gather together with our Lord Jesus Christ at the Great Banquet Table.

But Peter's point is that these eight people were saved in the ark. How? Through the water. Car wash. Baptism. You see? The Flood which destroyed the world was in fact the water which carried the ark to safety, where it landed on a Rock, a mountain. In the same way, the baptismal waters carry us through the flood, and from those flood waters we rise with Christ, and our feet are set upon the rock, the mountain of salvation, where we find the Cross of Christ, the source of our salvation.

The water that we wash people in at their baptism is not some magical water. It is a sign and a seal. It symbolizes being carried to life. But the thing it symbolizes is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Peter refers to the Resurrection, he includes the whole of Holy Week: the Cross and the Empty Tomb. As John Calvin puts it, "The glory is in the blood of Christ which the water is a sign; there is no glory in the water itself." He warns us not to confuse the sign and the thing itself.

So why offer the sign at all then? Because it is the entry point into the Ark, again, not the act of placing water on a person, but the thing which that act symbolizes. What are the benefits of seeing the sign?

Baptism is a sign that you belong to God and that you belong to Christ's Church, and that you are empowered by the Spirit.

The sign of Baptism is to give us a sign of God's continuing providence, and an assurance that leads to confidence sufficient to persevere in living out our faith and proclaiming it to others.

But Peter says there is more than just the exterior washing of the body in play. What needs to happen is that we are to be transformed by a cleansing of the interior of our lives, a cleansing which leaves us with a clear conscience before God.

As James Brownson puts it so well:

"Baptism is not a ticket to heaven, but a summons to a life of faith in Christ."

Brownson helpfully adds, for those of us who worry if our life is sufficiently transformed to have gained that clear conscience, "...I am convinced that even the smallest and most hidden effort truly to trust in God's promise will not be disregarded by the merciful God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Scripture encourages us that begin 'a bruised Reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench'."

But our life should be one lived in a constant effort to reform ourselves in thanksgiving for Christ's Cross. Calvin:

“Baptism includes the ‘remission of sins and renovation of the old man.’

“For how can there be a good and pure conscience, until our old man is reformed, and we be renewed in the righteousness of God?”

Our Catechism and Scripture testify to this truth as well:

**Q 69 . How does holy baptism remind and assure you that Christ's one sacrifice on the cross benefits you personally?**

A. In this way: Christ instituted this outward washing and with it promised that, as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and his Spirit wash away my soul's impurity, that is, all my sins.

**Q 72. Does this outward washing with water itself wash away sins?**

A. No, only Jesus Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.

...“he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit...” (Titus 3:5)

In other words, the car is not really clean if you wash just the exterior. God offers full-service cleansing, inside and outside, all thanks to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I recently bought a ten-pack of car washes for fundraiser for some of our boys' baseball team. Cars need to be continually washed. In Christ, though, we

need baptism only once. Still, we need a weekly, if not a daily reminder, to keep the interior clean. God looks on our hearts.

Here is today's Big Idea for you to remember: Baptism is a sign that you belong to God and that you belong to Christ's Church, and that you are empowered by the Spirit.



As baptized Christians we are then sent to live a life that is both a witness to God's grace and a proclamation of God's love.

Let's use this season of Lent, then, to remember the promise of Baptism, that our sins are forgiven, but that we are called to be transformed people. Let's show how much we care for this gift of life by actually getting out of the car, getting on our hands and knees, and clean out the interior of our lives so that we can with confidence await the day when we with a clear conscience realize the promise of baptism: that we belong to Christ forever.

AMEN