

A Bronze Serpent Then – Baptism Now

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

We are living in a time when good is called bad, and right is called wrong. Several years ago now, the former CEO and director of Planned Parenthood, Dr. Leana Wen made this alarming statement, *“Our nurses and our clinicians are all here because we believe in life. Being pro-choice is being pro-women. It’s being pro-family. It’s being pro-community. It’s being pro-life.”* If you’ve followed the ongoing redefinition of words in our culture, this ranks as one of the boldest; for every word spoken was redefined to suit Wen’s agenda. Many in the church are gun-shy to engage these falsehoods, knowing there are linguistic landmines everywhere.

Sadly, this also happens in the Kingdom of God. There are often issues of disagreement between well-intentioned church groups or denominations. One points the finger at another group calling their doctrine bad, while elevating their own as good. A church practices personal responsibility and holiness, but are called legalistic. Another church promotes the forgiveness and the grace of God, and are labelled as libertines. One church encourages self-sacrifice and stewardship, and are accused of promoting “salvation by works.” While another group challenges their members to hold God to His Biblical promises, and are then written off as “Name it – Claim it” heretics. The *Conviction* of one is sometimes seen as an *Idol* by others - which is not always the case...though sometimes it is.

Such is the case with Baptism. In many circles, including Lutheranism, it is seen as a blessed means of receiving God’s grace. But to others, it is little more than spiritual imagery or superficial symbolism. So when we speak of the blessedness of the sacrament, and the richness of its fruit, we are sometimes blindsided by the push-back we receive. We’re tempted to withhold comment unless we know we’re in familiar (read friendly) company, and then we simply whisper our conviction in each other’s ears. I myself face that temptation more often than I’d like to admit.

But we shouldn’t! We need to engage our peers, even if our perspectives aren’t welcomed. For we aren’t standing on the shifting sands of opinion or tradition, but on the solid teaching of Scripture. As we see in today’s New Testament lesson from 1 Peter 3.

1 Peter 3:18-22 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; 19 in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, 20 who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. 21 Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.

We start, where Peter began, with the universally accepted principle of Jesus’ vicarious atonement. On this point, all orthodox Christian churches agree. Jesus’ mission on this earth was the full and complete redemption of lost souls. His death and resurrection was the only means by which unholy people like ourselves, could bridge the chasm of sin’s debt, and be reconciled to God.

Jesus Himself, summarized this point in 3 verses when He referenced the story of Israel’s punishment in Numbers 21. He reminded Nicodemus of the healing brought to the grumbling masses, and the faith that could heal the consequence of their rebellion (the Bronze Serpent). Likewise, God’s Son would be lifted up, bringing healing to all lost in the dark rebellion of a sinful heart.

John 3:14-16 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

As the Christian group Newsong sang:

*He did what I couldn't do
Went to the cross so I could be forgiven.
He spent three days in the grave,
To make my life worth living.
And the wonder of salvation is
I could never be good enough.
He did what I couldn't do.*

The problem was that Israel soon began worshipping the bronze snake, instead of the Savior it represented. Likewise, we do the same thing with the grace of God...worshipping the means rather than the Savior.

2 Kin 18:4 He removed the high places and broke down the {sacred} pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan.

Then Peter continues with his thought:

1 Peter 3:19-20 ...in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, 20 who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.

This is the only time we see this glimpse into the darkened timeline of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It confronts the often-held belief that Jesus just lay in that dingy tomb as he waited for the miracle of Easter. What we are challenged to accept is that Jesus was actually taking care of some important spiritual business during those “silent” hours. As one commentator observed, “Peter has the data and the order of the Apostles’ Creed: *‘suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead (v. 21) and sitteth at the right hand of God, etc.’*”

Remember, there are no insignificant verses in the Bible...and *No* verses we can simply toss out. All Scripture

is God-breathed! (2 Tim. 3:16) And it was in that moment of human darkness that Jesus displayed His first act of exaltation (*not Humiliation*). He presented Himself as Victor and Lord to the host of hell, many of whom Peter identifies as those who were present at the first extra-ordinary judgement of God, The Flood. Peter explains that the very water that brought eternal judgement to the disobedient in Noah's day, also carried Noah and his family (*eight persons*) literally – not symbolically - to salvation and safety. Likewise, Jesus' death sealed the eternal fate of the lost, while making a way for the righteous to live by faith.

1 Peter 3:21-22 **Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.**

1 Peter 3:21 contains one of the boldest, and most controversial declarations on Baptism, “*Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you...*” But what does that mean, and how far can we take it?

Like the Bronze Snake in Moses' day, the sacrament of baptism, rightly received, is both a means and a pledge of salvation. The external participation of baptism will save no man without the parallel connection of faith. Similarly, Noah, though lifted above the destruction of creation by the floodwaters and the ark, couldn't have done so unless he'd been a man of faith. Building the Ark, gathering the animals, and entering the Ark were all actions flowing from a heart of faith.

Baptism, therefore, is a vehicle of grace unto salvation, and this vehicle is boarded by faith initiated by God. Again like the Serpent, God designed it, God works through it, and God completes it.

God used this powerful imagery in other passages:

Titus 3:5-6 **He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,**

Ephesians 5:26-27 **so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.**

But lest we get too carried away (*as some groups do*) and hide behind a form of sacramental universalism, we must address the need and application of faith. After all, Noah was not saved because of his personal righteousness, nor his being in the right place at the right time. Noah was saved (*carried*) by the waters of the flood by his faith.

Likewise, one shouldn't think that by receiving the sacrament of baptism a person is no longer obligated to walk in faith. Jesus, the very one who commanded the practice of Christian baptism, answers this argument in

Mark 16 where He states, “but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”

Mark 16:16 **He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.**

Matthew 28:19-20 **Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”**

Faith and baptism work together in the regenerative process in the human heart. They are the beginnings of a Christian life. But that does not remove the responsibility of a sanctified life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Luther's Small Catechism states it this way:

“It is only unbelief that condemns. Faith cannot exist in the heart of a person who despises and rejects Baptism against better knowledge. But those who believe the gospel, yet die before they have opportunity to be baptized are not condemned”

Another author has observed, “*God puts the question before man as to whether he wants to have a good conscience and receives the answer in the believing 'yes' of the one accepting baptism.*” (Schlatter) In other words, to say “yes” to baptism is to say yes to the work and redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Romans 6:3-5 **Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection,**

It wasn't the Bronze Serpent that saved the rebels from death...but rather, it was faith in the God who commanded and used the Snake. Likewise, our faith is not in Baptism itself, but grounded in the completed work of Jesus Christ unto salvation to all who believe - given to us through Baptism. The emphasis is on the faith and baptism God has provided for salvation, *OR* our rejection of the gospel (*and likewise baptism*) that results in damnation.

The responsibility still remains for the child of God to walk in right relationship with Christ daily. As Luther exhorted, it is critical for every believer to live daily in the covenant God began with us in our baptism. God's redemptive work, His impartation of faith and salvation, should drive us, daily, to “walk in newness of life.” We don't worship the snake, or Baptism. We live in submission to the Savior who has commanded it, and binds Himself to us as we use this means.