



Sunday, Nov. 15, 2020
First Sunday in Renovated Sanctuary

A Journey that Begins with Baptism
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

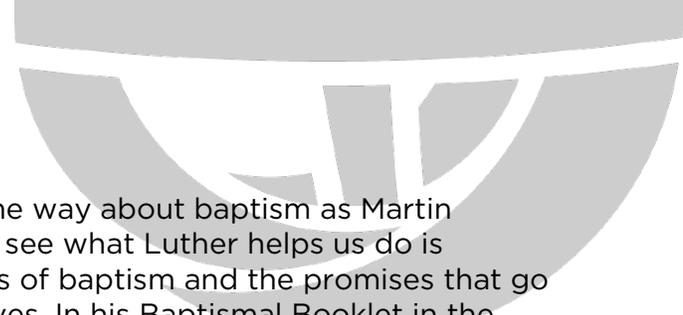
Revelation 22:1-5 NRSV

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

One of the joys of the last nine months have been the baptisms. Earlier this spring, we adapted the baptism class that we usually do in the Kairos Room between worship services and moved it online. I'll be honest, I wasn't sure how it was going to go. By and large, it went better than I would have expected. New parents have still been able to share the joys and challenges of having a newborn. They have still reflected on their own faith and on the faith they hope to pass on to their children. They've also been creative with how they gather their families. The first baptism we did this summer had family members Zooming in from Florida to Alaska.

In these months, we've had more than a dozen baptisms in backyards, and funeral chapels, on the lawn at church, even on a kitchen counter. And this weekend we had our first baptism in this sanctuary. You'll see that baptism in a just a bit as part of worship. Each of these baptisms have been pure joy and gift. Each has been a reminder that nothing can stop the Spirit of God from breaking into our lives with faith, and hope and love, even when it can feel like the world is falling down around us.

It's said that when Martin Luther would find himself in one of his darker moods, he would comfort himself by saying, "Martin, be calm, you are baptized." Now, I doubt that he was trying to recall the moment he was baptized as a small child; or that he was thinking that his baptism was some kind of magic spell that could pull him out of the darkness. Rather, I suspect that in remembering his baptism, he was remembering the claim God placed on him as a beloved child of God. In remembering this, he remembered that his life was inextricably tied to the Savior of the world, and that Jesus doesn't just save the world, Jesus saved him - and us too.

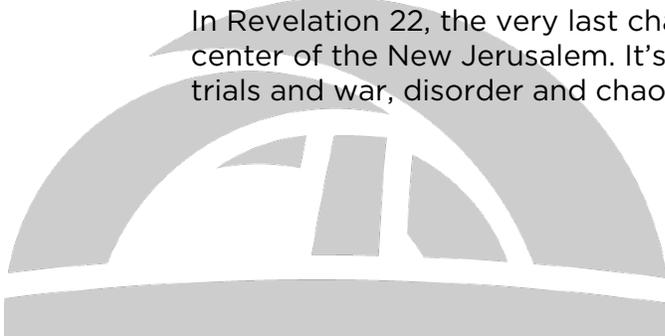


My guess is that not too many of us think in the same way about baptism as Martin Luther. But we might gain something if we did. You see what Luther helps us do is embrace the faith we have - to claim that the waters of baptism and the promises that go with them throughout our life have power for our lives. In his Baptismal Booklet in the Small Catechism, Luther wrote, “[Christ] himself, calls [baptism] a ‘new birth’, through which we, being freed from the devil’s tyranny and loosed from sin, death, and hell, become children of life, heirs of all God’s possessions, God’s own children, and brothers and sisters in Christ.” Nothing can take this away, but it isn’t a magic spell that automatically stops us from screwing things up, or harming ourselves or others. God offers forgiveness, not immunity from sin. Writer Rachel Held Evans says, “The good news [about being baptized] is you are a beloved child of God; the bad news is that you don’t get to pick your siblings.” Remember that being part of God’s family also means that you’re part of God’s church and that isn’t always easy.

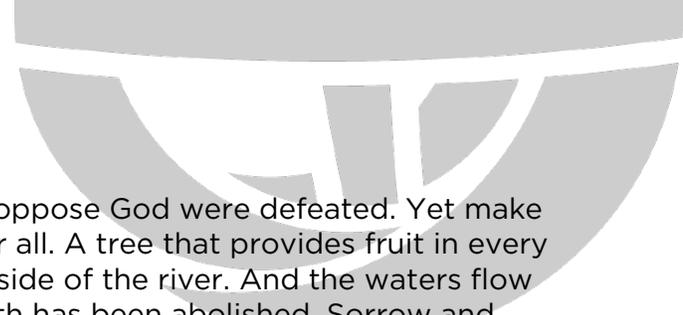
But how comfortable are we naming the times we screw up, or the evils and temptations that derail our trust in God, and harm our neighbors? These are the things that lead to death, in one way or another. Things like selfishness or greed. Things like abuse or negligence of those we love. Things like disregarding our care for creation or overindulgence or self-hate. These aren’t just mental, social, or emotional matters. They’re matters of the spirit. They impact the ways we see ourselves, each other, and God. Part of the rite of baptism that’s been present in the church for centuries is the renunciation of sin and evil. To renounce these things is not to deny that they exist, it is to deny that they have power over us, as God’s people. All of this begins with a few splashes of water, and the power of God’s Word in baptism. It seems almost too much to put into a five-minute ritual, doesn’t it? And yet, baptism is where this journey with God begins.

When discussions about renovations to our building began a few years ago, we tried to imagine what the future of our church would look like, and to what kind of ministry we were being called. Yes, there was plenty of talk of replacing things that were wearing out, like the roof and HVAC. But teams of people also spent lots of time dreaming and praying about what it would mean for us to be Zumbro Lutheran Church now and into the future.

As we started to plan for the sanctuary, you all identified that we wanted to improve practical things like the sound and lighting. It is definitely brighter in here! And with the added hearing loop, I’m sure it will be easier to hear as well. We wanted to improve sightlines so that wherever you sat in the sanctuary, you could feel like you were more a part of what was happening in worship. We also wanted to make sure that the space that we worshipped in had deep symbolism that rooted us in our faith, just as this sanctuary has since it was built 50 years ago. As teams discussed, prayed, and planned the image we continued to come back to was baptism and water. We were drawn to the connection of being named for the Zumbro River, but more importantly we felt the connection to the images of water that flow through all of scripture.



In Revelation 22, the very last chapter of the Bible, there is a river that runs through the center of the New Jerusalem. It’s a glorious image of God’s final redemption after great trials and war, disorder and chaos. Through all of it God was there to guard the faithful.



But now peace has come. Those who continued to oppose God were defeated. Yet make no mistake the New Jerusalem has room enough for all. A tree that provides fruit in every season, a sign of God's abundance grows on either side of the river. And the waters flow to the throne of God and the Lamb. In this city, death has been abolished. Sorrow and mourning and tears are no more. Those who bear God's name on their foreheads gather around the throne in worship and praise. These images remind us of the gift God has given us in our baptism. The water, the Word of promise, the hope and abundance, and the seal of Christ's name on our foreheads.

I would not call our remodeled sanctuary an image of the New Jerusalem. That might be a little over the top, plus there definitely wasn't enough money in the budget for all the gold. 😊 But when we are able to gather in this space again, and I pray that is sooner than later, you will notice that the font welcomes you in this this space as baptism welcomes us into the family of God. That the river that runs through the center of the sanctuary flows to the cross, where our sure and certain hope in resurrection life stands. And as you leave the space, notice how the river leads us back out into God's world, to live out our baptismal call. We are sent from worship to live a resurrection life - a life of love to our neighbors. A life of witness to the power of God to make all things new. A life of witness to the grace that God so freely offers. A life that blesses others and does not curse. And a life that is inseparable from the brothers and sisters who, with you, bear the name of Jesus on your brows. Amen.

