

First Lesson: Genesis 12:1-4a
Second Lesson: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
The Gospel: John 3:1-17

Second Sunday of Lent
March 8, 2020

“Power of Prayer: Confidence in Daily Living”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Judith Rainforth
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Gracious and loving God, as we continue on our prayerful Lenten journey with confidence in daily living, help us to let go of all those things you would ask us to let go of. Even as the evil one, the devil, tries to play havoc in our world, we know that we can live with confidence and our faith can go stronger with each and every valley and each and every mountain. Lord, be with us now, inspire us with your Holy Spirit as we listen, as we love, as we learn by praying the Scriptures. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

We are people of the question, rather than people of the answer. The other day we had a Bible study on praying the scriptures. I call it lectio divinas, old way of praying the Scriptures. I am sure it was a stretch for some because we read it over several times. We read the Bible and we pray the Scriptures to find questions and hopefully to find answers. As more is revealed to each one of us, to try to understand more about what God is trying to tell us and asking us to do. Today I would like to share some of those questions and answers about being born, about being born again, about baptism and how we as brothers and sisters in Christ live out our baptismal faith in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

What is baptism and why is it such a disputed topic in our society? Some of you are life long Lutherans, you know we have two sacraments; we have baptism and we have communion. The Catholics have seven sacraments. Doesn't change anybody's life does it? We don't have to condemn what other faith traditions believe. What we have to do is grow in our faith and ask God “What is it that we are to believe?” We live with confidence because of the promises of Jesus that we received in baptism and in the Lord's Supper.

In the Middle Ages, people started choosing sponsors or godparents for babies, for children, for people that were baptized. A lot of that was due to the lifespan of the people, they wanted to make sure that if parents died a child would be taken care of. We still have godparents and sponsors for those who are baptized, probably not for the same reason most of us write a will and we say if something happens to me this is who I want to take care of my children. The meaning of baptism for us is such an important meaning, important sacrament in our lives. This Thursday, I am planning on baptizing a 92 year-old woman, a friend of mine, in the chapel. Her family will be here. She has professed Christianity all her life, but for some reason it just never happened that she was baptized. I was visiting her the other day and I said,

“Leona, have you ever been baptized?” She said, “No.” I said, “Really? Would you like to be?” She just lit up like a Christmas tree. I talked to her family and they are going to be here. We are going to rejoice in that. Does it matter whether she has a sponsor or not? Probably not.

I want to share a little bit about a confirmation class and how I taught them about baptism. I took them up to the baptismal font and I told one of them to pretend like he had a terrible accident and was dying. I want you to reach out and beg for baptism. So he did – they love to role play. I said to the group, “Who is going to baptize him?” They looked at me. I said, “Who do you think can in this group?” I said, “You know, if somebody is dying and they are begging you for baptism, first look for some water. You can baptize just like an ordained pastor can. It doesn’t have to be somebody with credentials to do a baptism.” They were amazed at that.

Tuesday we had a pastors group that meets here every week and we talked about baptism. I had never heard this one, but it makes sense, if you do baptize a person, you should probably contact the church and make a record of it, because we do that we have certificates of baptism. I can’t tell you how many times people would come to the church I was in in Omaha, it was a historical church, and they would want a record of their ancestors’ baptism. I thought “I’m glad we have that for them” because we want to know that our loved ones are baptized. Then on the other hand, we want to make sure that we are not condemning people to hell if they weren’t baptized. This happens so often.

I grew up in conservative church that taught me that and I felt sad. I felt really sad. I felt really sad too when they convinced me that my brother who had committed suicide was going to hell. I had to seek out a Catholic priest for consolation. I said, “Father, is that true? Is my brother really in hell?” He looked at me and said, “I’m going to tell you a story.” He said, “There was a Catholic priest, much like me, he had a parishioner that died from suicide and the rule was he couldn’t be buried in the Catholic cemetery. Of course this priest had to abide by those rules, so they had the service, they buried the man outside of the cemetery. The next day, the priest went out there and moved the fence.” Father looked at me and he said, “Let it go. We are not the judge. Nobody has that right.” From that day on, I could accept that my brother died a tragic way, but we are not the judge. His daughter, many years later, my niece became a pregnant teenager unwed. She gave birth to a baby that died at birth. It was the first time I ever saw a baby’s casket. Years later I went to visit her in her dorm room at college. I said, “Who painted that picture?” She said, “I did.” I said, “What is it?” I knew what it was, it was an arm sticking out of a grave. I said, “Cindy, why did you paint that picture and what does it mean?” Well, her uncle, who, as a Fundamentalist born-again Christian, had convinced her that her baby was in hell. Not only did she have the shame of being a pregnant teenage unwed mother, but she lived with that for several years. I vowed to do whatever I can to help people understand – **please** don’t make judgments on other people’s decisions or the way they

live. We need to pay attention to our own life. Live with the confidence, because of the promises that Jesus gives us.

My sister and I left the conservative church that we had grown up with about the same time. Later on, we were having a conversation because I came to a church much like this, and she went off to a Baptist church which was fine, she is a very faithful woman. She came and said, "I was rebaptized." I said, "Really? What's that about. I don't care, but really, was it necessary?" She said, "Well it is in this church if you want to vote." Yesterday, Wally, I was sitting next to one of our retired pastors and I was sharing that story because he said he had been a Baptist. He said, "Oh yes, there were some Southern Baptist, maybe there still are, that if you change and go to a different congregation in that same denomination you get rebaptized again." I thought, "Wow, how many times could you do that in a lifetime?" I don't care. I'm not making any judgment about it, it doesn't happen to be my belief, wasn't Martin Luther's belief that you should be rebaptized. I was baptized as an infant, some of you were probably that way, maybe some as an adult. Once when I was a baby, but I am reborn every day. I am rebaptized every day in the promises of baptism.

Our Bishop, David deFreese, used to say, "Every day when I stand in my shower, I remember my baptism." I hope that's the way it is for us that we continue to let the waters of baptism wash over us and remind us of those wonderful promises that we received because Jesus died on the cross. God is gracious and we are justified by faith not works. That is in the DNA of every one of us as Lutherans that we, because of the Grace of God, are justified by faith, not works.

There is a lot of controversy about the reborn theology, but it doesn't apply to our Lutheran theology. I spent the week immersed in Martin Luther's teachings about this, and it was refreshing to me that he even had questions about it. He prayed his way about it. Prayed his way through all the controversial talk about baptism and what it means and what it doesn't mean. Whatever others are moved to do, I see no problem if there is not a condemnation of others who do it differently. At confirmation in our Lutheran communities, we reaffirm those baptismal vows that we took, and when we were babies our parents, our sponsors took those vows for us. They were vows to raise us in the faith, to teach us the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, live by justice and peace and all those things that I hope many of us grew up with and that we continue to learn.

Jesus said, "What is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above, the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it. But you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'" Born of the Spirit, that is what we are. If we don't believe that we are born of the Spirit, if we get all caught up in whether we were immersed in a lake or an ocean or in a baptismal font, if we don't believe that we are

born of the Spirit, we live our life alone, not in relationship with God in a way that guides and brings about confidence and a heavenly experience on earth and in eternity. God is love, and he comes to me even when I was in my mother's womb. God was loving each one of us. Baptism, as I said before, is a daily birth.

When I was reading my devotions this morning, I sent some off to Pastor Lowell because I had talked to him yesterday. I can't go too deep into this because I get too emotional, but we have such rich conversations about our faith. This morning in my devotions, I read "*It is not a question if Jesus is listening to us, but are we listening to Jesus?*" I say this over and over – we pray, we talk to Jesus, but we need to take time and be still and know that God is God so that we can hear what he says to us. In our baptismal promises, the gift comes not from any merit of our own, but that God gave his son that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Many of us have memorized that verse. I bet if I asked each of you, I wouldn't venture to guess how many, but we learned this verse a long time ago "*That God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" But too many people forget to read verse 17. I just recited verse 16. Verse 17 *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved by him.* What a beautiful promise that is.

We read in Romans that Abraham is the forebearer and model for both Jews and Gentiles because we too trust that ours is a God who gives life to the dead. Even Jews and Gentiles, doesn't that tell us that just because somebody doesn't believe the way we do, we are not to condemn them. In Genesis, God's call of Abram and Sara came with a clear purpose that through them all the families of the earth would gain a blessing. As they set out on their journey they were accompanied by promises of blessings. Your faith brings blessings to others, keep coming back to this church – not only for yourself, but for others. For the generations that come after us. I hope this church is standing strong and faithful for generations to come, long after we have left to go to our eternal home. Are we willing to pray our way through the Scriptures and live out our baptismal calling? And to go out into the world to proclaim the Gospel inspired by the Holy Spirit, by the way we live, with examples and deeds.

Let us pray – Oh God, our leader and guide, in the waters of baptism you bring us to new birth. To live as your children with confidence in our daily living. Strengthen our faith in your promises, that by your spirit we may lift up your life to all the world through your Son Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen