

Baptism of Our Lord—January 7, 2024
Text: Romans 6:1-11
Theme: Because He Rose, We Rise

I have a friend who refers to Holy Baptism as the forgotten sacrament. I think we do a better job these days of keeping Baptism in the limelight but when I was growing up, it had been relegated to being a church rite that had little importance for anyone beyond the family of the baby being baptized. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder and familiarity breeds contempt. I think that was what happened to the Church, at least in this country. When us boomers came through, there were literally thousands of babies to be baptized. Because of the sheer number, many pastors began baptizing privately in the afternoon because otherwise they would have had three to five baptisms every Sunday. This practice morphed into never having baptisms in the worship service and even to this day I will encounter people from time to time who want a private baptism outside the worship service. I decline that request because baptism is not a private ceremony. It is a public sacrament of the Church and should be done in the context of the worship service where the people of God can witness it whenever it is possible to do so. And the congregation is privileged to witness it because baptism is central to our whole confession of faith. St. Paul says,

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

If our epistle sounds familiar it is because you hear it every time we have a funeral. It is part of the funeral liturgy because the funeral completes the cycle of a Christian’s life on this earth. Christians experience two births and one death. We are physically born. We are spiritually born in baptism and then we physically die. The cycle is complete and our life continues in Heaven. Because we are united with Christ through baptism into His death, we are united with Christ through Baptism into His life. He rose from he dead and so we shall rise from the dead. In our reading from Romans, Paul is explaining this to the Christians in Rome because they need to know that Holy Baptism has changed them even as it has changed us. It moves us out of the darkness and into the family of God. Now that makes us incongruous with sin. When our clean baptized soul comes into contact with sin, it’s like oil and water. That is why we experience guilt and shame when we sin. It is not that we are afraid God is going to zap us with a bolt of lightning, but the sin we

thought would be fun makes us feel out of place and distant from God. That is what baptism does for us for our whole lives.

That is what we mean when we sing, "We are but strangers here. Heaven is our home." I was born and raised in Seattle but Seattle today is not the Seattle of my youth. When I visited last summer, I felt as though I were in a foreign place where the geography looked familiar but the people and the customs were all different. Seattle used to be the wild west where people lived a fairly rugged, individualistic life. Now it feels more like George Orwell's 1984. The government demands social conformity and people are required by law to live their lives in whatever way the government deems appropriate much of which does not mesh very well with Christianity. The people there don't seem to notice that they are being beaten into submission with laws and ordinances saying what you can and cannot do, say or think. It is subtle for the most part but to someone from outside the context and someone who knew the city before, it was like jumping from the hot tub into ice water. I felt like a stranger there. It was no longer my home.

That is what baptism does to us. It wakes us up to the glory of God and changes us in a good way so that the things in this world that are just accepted no longer seem good to us. It makes us feel like outsiders because we are. The next time you are in a situation

where everybody seems to be okay with what is being said or done and you feel clammy and uncomfortable, that is your baptism at work. The next time someone begins pontificating about what they think is best but you feel as though he is calling up, down and black, white, that is your baptism at work. Because of our baptism, we know what is good and what is holy. The challenge for us, of course, is the same challenge as the Romans had. Will we fail to stand up for what is right so that we won't be labeled as out-of-touch outsiders, or will we speak up and loudly proclaim the Word of God?

Thanks be to God that he did not leave us without resources. He nourishes the faith He created in us at Baptism with His holy Word and the very body and blood of Jesus. He gives us the power we need to overcome any obstacle and He walks with us through it all until our blessed death when this text from St. Paul's epistle to the Roman Church will be read over our dead bodies and everyone there will be reminded again that because Christ died, our sinful nature died and because Christ rose from the dead, so too will we.