

The Baptism of Our Lord  
12 January, Anno Domini 2020  
1 Corinthians 1:26-31  
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In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

We live in a day and age when people think that the most important question to ask is “Who am I?” or perhaps they phrase it “What is my purpose in life?” It’s a very old question and it really is an important question. So we read books and go on retreats and start journals. People turn to philosophy or science or even just navel gazing in hopes of finding an answer. And, not surprisingly, most people either give up trying out of exhaustion or they despair because no matter how hard they look they don’t find anything or, worse, the best they can come up with is their inability to be what they think they should be.

I imagine that many of you have asked these questions directly or indirectly. How did you answer? Did you answer? Did you define yourself by the work you do? Do your talents and abilities and your ability to harness them to bring success tell you who you are? Did you define yourself by your ability or inability to meet a particular standard of character and virtue? Does your definition come from the contribution you are able to make to the world, particularly economically?

I have seen so many people struggling with this question, looking desperately for meaning and purpose in their lives, chasing anyone or anything that promises to end their search. Let me give you some great and freeing news - none of those things I mentioned above are who you are. They do not define what you are. The truth is that you can quit your searching because you don’t have to figure these things out at all. God has already answered the question by defining you Himself in Holy Baptism. When our Lord Jesus Christ walked out of the waters of the Jordan, God the Father declared “This IS my beloved Son...” Period. Who Jesus is, is the Son of God. That is the totality and centrality of His existence. His sonship isn’t part of His identity. It’s His entire identity. Everything else flows from that reality. Everything Jesus says and does is a product of that fact which God Himself declared.

This is the power and magnitude of your own baptism and why it should be the first thing on your mind every day and the first thing you put on you children’s minds. The day you were washed in the font Almighty God made you something by His Word poured out to you in the water. Just as surely as the sun and the

moon appeared at the sound of His Word, so too, when God declared that you ARE His child, that you ARE forgiven, that you ARE righteous, then you became those very things. Stop wringing your hands and vainly walking around trying to find yourself. God has given you the answer. God has made abundantly clear who and what you are. There is no question. You don't have to wonder or doubt. You ARE baptized. You ARE a child of God. You ARE forgiven.

That certainly isn't something you came up with yourself. The brain surgeon didn't wake up this morning and decide "Today I am going to operate on peoples' brains. Who wants to be first?" No one should presume to stand in the pulpit just because they want to. Christ says, through His Church, "I ordain you into the Office of the Holy Ministry of the Word and Sacraments. Today I make you a pastor." You don't become God's child by reflection and meditation and self-realization. There is no god-consciousness within you that you awaken through spiritual exercises. And you certainly don't just wake up one day and decide "I've decided that I'm going to be a child of God today. Today I will be righteous." That's as foolish as the non-existent pre-conceived child deciding in his non-existence that he is going to be conceived and born. It's nonsense. As St. John writes, becoming a child of God happens not by the will of your flesh (because it is sinful and wants nothing less than to be a child of God) or by the will of man (because man sold his will into slavery to the devil) but by the will of God (who desires that all men be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth).

Could there be anything more comforting?! God loved the world by willingly giving His only-begotten Son so that whoever believes that Jesus has died for sin and risen from the dead should not perish but have everlasting life. And this same God causes this good news to be preached to all the ends of the earth so that all might hear, including you. And so that each sinner may be certain of his salvation from God, the Lord has promised that whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. If you are baptized, then you can say with 100% certainty "God has forgiven my sins because what God promises and commands IS." Your Baptism, far from being just some empty symbolic action (as though the heavens only seemed to open up, as though the whole dove thing was just a metaphor, as though there wasn't ACTUALLY a voice from heaven), made you something you weren't before. It says who you ARE, what you ARE, whose you ARE.

Our anxiety and despair over the question of our identity only comes because we doubt God's promise in Baptism. Sometimes it's because we buy into the false idea that Baptism is only good until we mess it up with our sin. After that, we need something more, something better, some kind of works of satisfaction to pay

off the debt we've incurred that Jesus didn't pay for. That means that now it's up to us to fight and win our way back by trying to do better. But does your child stop being your child because they messed up, because they didn't follow your instructions? Do you kick them out of the house and cut them out of the will? Of course not. How much less is that the case with your heavenly Father? His promise of forgiveness isn't conditional nor does it have an expiration date. His adoption of you isn't predicated on your moral fortitude. It is an absolute adoption that He will never renounce. The strength of your Baptism lies completely within the faithfulness of God and the eternal nature of His Word, not yours. You can't undo your Baptism. You can renounce it. You can reject its blessings and promises but that doesn't mean that God doesn't still hold them out to you. In fact, that is one of the chief blessings of Baptism, the essence of confession and absolution, the comfort of the the Holy Communion. Though we break faith with God, He does not break faith with us. He has made a promise. Nothing in heaven or on earth can change that. We can repent and return.

Your Baptism is there for you to return to until the day you die. It doesn't matter how far or how long you have wandered. The opportunity remains to repent and return to the mercy given in Baptism. The whole reason we confess our sins is because God is our merciful Father who will joyfully receive us back and not hold our sins against us. That is why confessing our sins is simply living out our Baptism every day. "What does such baptizing with water indicate? It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires..." The Baptism of our Lord has revealed Jesus as the Son of God who was appointed as the Lamb of atonement and bore the punishment of our sins in His own Body. His Baptism fulfills all righteousness because it lays your sins upon Him. And your Baptism bestows upon you every last drop of forgiveness that Christ has obtained through His suffering and death. When you were baptized all His righteousness was laid upon you - a spotless white garment covering every last blot and stain of sin. This gift isn't ever given and then taken. It is given. Period. The only condition under which our Baptism is unable to help us is if we reject it, if we refuse the very grace that it has given. It always stands there, ready for our repentant return. Our status as sons still hasn't changed, even though we may faithlessly despise our sonship and the inheritance promised to us. While Scripture doesn't teach once saved always saved it most certainly teaches once baptized always baptized. You are Baptized. You ARE a child of God. That is who you are.

We may also deprive ourselves of the comfort of our Baptismal identity by falling into the false teaching of those who teach that Baptism doesn't actually bestow

anything, that it is nothing more than a symbolic gesture on your part, indicating to God that you have decided to allow Him to be your Savior and that you are dedicating yourself to Him and promising to be an obedient child. I can't really think of anything less comforting and, frankly, less offensive. God bestows a free and rich gift and we arrogantly turn it into our gift to God. If Baptism is our own work and promise to God, what remains when we fail to keep it, when we sin? What becomes of our promise then? All we are left with is the reality that our promise and thus our Baptism was a lie, that we aren't that dedicated to God after all, and that, therefore, we really aren't Christians, no matter how hard we try. This, too, is the devil's crafty work, robbing God's gracious gifts of the blessings they are given to bestow and turning them into more empty works that we do for God.

Your Baptism is 100% God's work of rescuing you from the devil and drawing you into His family. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. They hamstring God and tell Him what He can and can't do. And, in the end, they drive you back to empty navel-gazing so that you can figure out what's wrong with you and what you are going to do to fix it - a completely hopeless endeavor. God is certainly not above working through external means like water. The waters of the Jordan didn't stand still until the soles of the priests carrying the ark of the covenant stood in the water. God certainly could have just in a magical way made that happen but He didn't. And how can we say that it is beneath the Lord to use earthly things when our Lord Himself took on human flesh? Lord, in your mercy, silence such false teachers who seek to rob you of your glory and your children of the precious comfort of your appointed gifts.

Your Baptism is the most precious gift that you possess. It is an eternal gift from your heavenly Father so that you can put to rest any doubt about who you are and exactly what He has done...for you. Let these gracious promises of Christ drown out the lies of the devil and your own flesh and the foolish false teachers who despise this gift and would have you believe that it's not enough.

And then rejoice because the Lord graciously made you and told you exactly what you are. Your purposes are right in front of you. You don't need to change the world or make a profound impact on a large swath of humanity. As His child who knows that God has created you, body and soul and abilities and talents, you can also rejoice in the other things that He has made you. Are you a man or a woman? That is part of how God has defined you. What are your various stations in life? As the Small Catechism asks "Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker?" You are at least some of those and God has told you what each

of those things are and the obligations and responsibilities that He has laid upon you so that you can serve and bless your neighbor. You didn't create any of those things and thus they aren't yours to define. But thanks be to God who has graciously ordered His creation and lays out clearly for us what we are to do in those stations.

Your purpose in life is given to you in the stations God has placed you. Husbands, love and care for you wives as Christ. Wives, receive the love and headship of your husband in faith. Parents, raise your children in the Christian faith, teach them to be useful to their neighbors, provide them with their daily bread. Children, honor and respect your parents and receive their instruction. Citizens, honor and pray for your government and pay your taxes. Christians of any age, cling to the pure Word of God and receive the Holy Sacraments that He has instituted and given you. Pray and study the Word of God at home and on Sunday morning. Give cheerfully and generously in faith and thankfulness to God to support the preaching and the teaching of His live-giving Word. Love and care for and encourage and pray for your brothers and sisters in Christ. Do your part to care for the parish Christ has given you. Employers and employees, treat one another well and do not be greedy. Love and serve your neighbor in his need. All of this is simply living out the freedom and grace bestowed upon us in our Baptism. We have more than enough purpose in our lives given to us by God, more than enough to keep us busy our whole life long. We don't need to go on some pilgrimage to find more.

Dear Christian, don't trouble yourself with some endless and fruitless search for meaning and purpose. God has already bestowed that all upon you. You are His child. He has defined you in Baptism. He has made you righteous. He has promised you the inheritance of eternal life. And He has graciously set before you precious neighbors to protect and provide for. These may not seem very glorious to the world, but they are precious to God and we honor Him when we live according to who He has made us - redeemed children loving and caring for their neighbors, especially the weakest and most vulnerable among us. Who are you? If you are baptized, you are a child of God our heavenly Father and an heir of His gracious kingdom.

In the Name of +Jesus.