

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 14, 2018
Christ the Rock Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Titus 3:4-7 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

“Your Baptismal Adoption”

What do Superman, Snow White, Harry Potter and Luke Skywalker all have in common? You'll have to go beyond the most obvious answer: that they made their authors and movie studios gazillions of dollars. Each one shares something in common with you and me. And we share something in common with people in China and Peru, a baby born two weeks ago and someone who lived 900 years ago. All of us were adopted. For most of us, it's a different kind of adoption than those comic book and fairy tale and movie characters. I guess I will admit I don't know the entire back story of Snow White or Luke Skywalker. You can fill me in later on that if you are an expert on those characters. But according to Titus chapter 3, we have an adoption from God. In Baptism God found you and claimed you and brought you into his family to give you a new life and a changed identity and a beautiful hope. These verses teach us your baptism is your adoption.

Now I understand such strong language about baptism will bring some quizzical looks from a lot of Bible-believing Christians. So I will first acknowledge that this Bible teaching is one of the more contentious issues among Christians. Some Christians who believe a lot of the same things you do, who have a very solid understanding of most of the Bible, will disagree very vehemently with what I'm about to say today about Baptism. And the Lord's Supper.

And so the obvious question for us is: why not just avoid this issue or agree to disagree? Once we dig in deeper to Titus chapter 3 I think you will agree with me that this isn't some insignificant issue. And we certainly do want to celebrate what we have in common with so many other Christians. And yet these verses are a key window into how we view Jesus and give us key insights into our relationship with Jesus and how our Christians lives are lived for Jesus. When we get right down to it, Baptism isn't ultimately about being theologically correct or winning religious arguments. It's all about finding comfort and strength in your identity. That all ties back to Baptism. Because Baptism is all about God's action, God's gift, God's adoption.

And yet we realize our natural human response to the idea of Baptism goes in one of two directions. Either we wonder if we are even worthy of something so astounding from God. Or we temper our enthusiasm because we can't help thinking whether it's really even necessary at all.

To help address our natural reluctance when it comes to baptism, let's compare it to foster families. I have so much respect for foster parents. You know that being a parent in general is hard enough. But some people take it to the next level and serve as foster parents. And that means any day at any hour they could get the news that another child will be coming to their home. That child might be 13 years old or 13 days old. And the child is coming to a new home for a reason. There are typically extra challenging circumstances that won't allow her to go back to her original home. I can almost imagine how hard it must be for those foster parents, but I have to admit I have no way to put myself in the shoes of that foster child. We admire those parents who welcome a new child into their family. But the new child has just been through something awful. Their world has been turned upside down. They have trouble wondering if they are at fault, if there is something wrong with them.

I think this helps explain our natural human skepticism toward the good news from God. It just sounds too good to be true. Every other relationship, even our best and most joy-filled human relationships, leave us disappointed some times. And that's why we approach our relationship with God with a little bit of reluctance. So when the Apostle Paul begins this section about our baptismal adoption into God's family, he starts off this way: **"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."** (Titus 3:4,5)

So the questions "am I worthy?" and "is it necessary?" are both answered in Baptism. You need God's mercy. It is necessary because of who you are on your own. Because of what you've done and what you can't do, you can't do for yourself what God does by adopting you. No person on this planet has ever kept all the commands of God perfectly. One theologian makes it even more sweeping: *"In other words, Paul says more than that we did not meet the righteous requirements of the Mosaic Law; We did not meet the requirements of any code of true moral law."* (Lenski, p. 932) No amount of effort will remove your every wrong, every mistake, every flaw. All the things you do, all your accumulated accomplishments, all your best resolutions, and all your most distraction-free efforts won't be enough to measure up. Without God's intervention, your situation would be completely hopeless. No, we learn from Titus it was all **"because of his mercy."** (Titus 3:5)

When you and I and every person on the planet were a complete lost cause, that's when God's kindness and love appeared. Titus tells us: **"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."** (Titus 3:4,5) That brings us to your worthiness.

God's kindness and love for humanity appeared to take care of your unworthiness head on. Kind of like a family showing up at an animal shelter. People look for different things when they're looking for pets. Different traits in different animals appeal to them differently. Some are looking for purebreds. This specific breed of dog will be about this height and weight, with a certain kind and color of hair. And yet, even the most carefully bred pups will carry some sort of genetic defect or family flaws. Then there are pet lovers who looking for the right puppy with the right personality. If he is cute and energetic and happy, that's the one they want. Others can't help themselves whenever they see some stray just abandoned

on the street. The more pathetic and helpless the animal looks, the more the pet lover's heart goes out to that animal.

The point is, you are that puppy. And if you're insulted by being compared to a dog, you can think of yourself as a cat. But we all have a way of thinking about ourselves. You might see yourself as that purebred or cute and energetic pup at the pound or the stray out on the street. No matter how you view yourself or think other people see you, all of us are deeply flawed. And yet God's adopts us. The difference is, God knows what he's getting. God adopts you into his family knowing every flaw, even the ones you aren't aware of about yourself. God finds you and chooses to love you. The only thing that makes you worthy, is that God saw the need to rescue you and give you a home.

So when did this "**the kindness and love of God our Savior**" make an appearance on the scene of worthless and needy humanity? (Titus 3:4) God's love came onto the stage in an amazing way when Jesus was born. Jesus made his first big splash when he went out to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Throughout his entire redemptive work, Jesus put a huge spotlight on God's love and kindness.

That love and kindness of God wasn't just put on display in the life of Jesus to get attention, thousands of "likes" or generate clicks with sensationalist headlines. God "**saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.**" (Titus 3:5,6) Baptism is your adoption because it connects you to Jesus.

In Luke chapter three we heard earlier that Jesus was baptized. If we need Baptism because we aren't righteous and can't add up all our accomplishments to get right with God, it doesn't seem like Jesus would need to be baptized. If we are unworthy of God's love on our own, but are adopted in Baptism, then Jesus didn't need to be anywhere near the Jordan River. Actually, Jesus didn't need baptism. He didn't require any washing from any spiritual contamination. He didn't need a bath from any of his own filth. Jesus needed to be baptized for you. In his baptism, Jesus identifies with sinners to take up our cause. Jesus joins himself to you and to every other baptism. He takes on himself the load of your guilt, the burden of your shame, the baggage of your unworthiness. Baptism is your connection to everything Jesus did for you: "**He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.**" (Titus 3:5,6)

I'm amazed at the patience and persistence of parents who go through the effort of adopting a child. In just about every case, those parents tell about their frustrations. They fill out all the paperwork. They have their home inspected and their privacy invaded to prove they will be suitable parents. They spend tens of thousands of dollars in administrative and legal fees. The adoption agency alerts them, they will have a child. Then calls back to tell things have changed. No explanation. Just more waiting. Then they are told to jump on a plan and head to the hospital. And it's all worth it to hold that newest family member in their arms.

We sometimes wonder how much we do in baptism compared to what God does. It's exactly the same as that relationship between child and adoptive parent. Your adoption is all God's work. The only thing you bring is your need. The only contribution you make is your unworthiness. God is the one at work in the **"the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."** (Titus 3:5) A pastor's hand might pour water and say "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." But only God can pour out the Holy Spirit. No matter whose hand it is, no matter who says the words, God connects you to Jesus. God baptizes you with the baptism of Jesus.

Baptism sometimes feels as relevant to us today as those baseball cards sitting up in the attic or that trophy from the second grade spelling bee. Does it even matter anymore? Does it really make a difference for you today if it happened so many years ago? Let's go back to Titus. There is a reason and purpose for your baptism: **"He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit... so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."** (Titus 3:5,7) Baptism gives you more than a one-time boost or a momentary energy drink jolt. It changes you. It makes you something you weren't before. It gives you hope.

That's one of the most common words I've seen so far in this new year. I can't really tell you the difference between hashtags or memes or just words online. But hopefulness in 2018 seems like a big topic. And every baptized believer has reason to be hopeful. But probably not for the reasons you see on social media.

If you step on the scale in December of 2018 and you've gained 15 pounds instead of taking them off; if you were stuck inside more often than you went for your daily walk; if you splurged more often on doughnuts and chips, had that extra glass of wine or cup of coffee instead of cutting back; if you were more irritable with your spouse and less patient with your children; if you carried toxic emotions and feelings around with you instead of becoming more mindful and at peace; even if you find yourself slipping and failing next year, next month, or next week; you have hopefulness. Because you still have your baptism.

Jesus appeared to give real flesh and bones to God's grace and kindness. Jesus saved you one time by his rescue. But that relationship doesn't end. And neither does the Holy Spirit stop working in your life. His is poured out over and over and over again for you. God's renewing grace comes to you every time you fail. His reinvigorating power comes to you every day of your adopted life. So go back to your baptism. Often. Earnestly.

Your might never feel as powerful as Superman or be part of as much action as Luke Skywalker or get a fairy tale ending like Snow White. But your baptism means you are adopted. Right after these verses, in Titus 3:8 we get this conclusion: **"This is a trustworthy saying."** God's promises to you are trustworthy. They aren't just words. They were given you by your faithful God. Your God who adopted you. Your God comes to you in baptism to give you the hope that comes with all the rights and privileges from being part of his family. Your baptism is your adoption. Amen.