

“New Life”  
Romans 6:1-11

January 8, 2012

The Baptism of Our Lord

When driving, avoiding the ditch is the name of the game. The challenge, however, is that there is a ditch on both sides of the road. Often, in trying to avoid one ditch on one side of the road (where we don't want to be), we can overcompensate in our driving only to end up in the ditch on the other side of the road (where we also don't want to be). It can be quite a challenge, especially during bad weather and difficult driving conditions, to avoid both ditches.

The same could be said about our Christian walk on the road to heaven. There are two ditches to this road. One is the ditch of works' righteousness. This is the way of thinking and living as if our relationship with God and our salvation somehow depend upon our actions. There is blatant works' righteousness which says that, by our good works, we merit God's favor and gain everlasting life. We think that this is the way that only non-Christians think. But some Christians (even Lutherans) think that way. In *A Study of Generations*, a survey of Lutherans conducted by Lutheran Brotherhood forty years ago, found that “about two out of five Lutherans believe in salvation by works.” (p.289)

There are more subtle forms of works righteousness. Some will acknowledge that God does all the work to save us, but it really doesn't become effective in our lives until we invite Him in or make a personal decision in favor of Christ. Some may think that, while Christ has saved us, maintaining our relationship with God is up to us through improved obedience to the will of God or personal piety.

Whether expressed in subtle or blatant ways, the ditch of works' righteousness assumes that there is something good in us, no matter how big or small, which affects our status with God.

But Bible paints a completely different picture. The Bible describes our natural state this way: “you were dead in your transgressions and sins.” (Eph. 2:1). There are no exceptions. Paul says in Romans, “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no

one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'... There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:10-12, 22-23)

If we want to try and get to God through our own merit, we have to be perfect, God says, just as He is perfect. This is just impossible. The Scriptures say, "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." (Gal. 3:10) Of course, this is all a pipe dream that we could ever do this in the first place. As Paul writes, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." (Rom. 8:7)

When we fall into this ditch, we realize our hopeless state. We are filled with guilt and despair. Not only have we not done anything to make or maintain a relationship with God, we are unable to do so. We are left with the Law's condemnation and the sentence of death and hell.

This is why the rediscovery of the Gospel in the Reformation was such sweet and comforting news. God, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, has done what we have not done and cannot do. He came into this world as the baby of Bethlehem to rescue us. He obeyed the Law of God in our place, taking our sin upon Himself and giving us His holiness. He endured all the punishment which our sin deserved – including death and hell itself – and rose from death to life victoriously.

The results of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection are given to us freely as a gift to be received by faith which itself is a gift. The Scriptures say, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." (Eph. 2:8-9) Paul's conclusion in Romans is our conclusion, too: "For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." (Rom. 3:28) God has done it all – the saving and the conveying of salvation. We have done nothing.

With that happy news, we (especially as Lutherans) overcompensate in our view of life and stagger from the ditch of works' righteousness over to the second ditch on the other side of the road –

the ditch of lawlessness. This is the way of thinking and living that says, since we can't do anything to contribute to our salvation, we don't have to do anything as we live our lives. Since we have been freed from the demands of the Law, God expects nothing of us. It doesn't matter what we do because God loves us and always forgives us.

The morality of Christians these days is sadly similar to non-Christians. Christians worship the gods of the culture - wealth, popularity, and success – just like non-Christians. Christians take the name of the Lord in vain and enjoy it as part of our entertainment in movies and television. Christians violate the Sabbath day as much as any non-Christian. Christians take the command to worship, be in the Word of God, and support the ministry of the Gospel as if it was an optional suggestion when it doesn't conflict something else we want to do. Christians live together outside of marriage, divorce, use pornography, get drunk, lie, cheat on their income taxes, and steal in other ways. The problem is not that Christians sin (all people are sinners). The problem is that we don't care that we sin. We think we don't have to worry about doing good works because they don't figure in our salvation. We think sin is no big deal because God is gracious and will forgive us no matter what we do because we believe in Jesus.

But what good is that kind of faith? The Bible asks the same question. James says, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 2:14-17)

What about the idea that, since God is gracious, it doesn't matter if we sin? Our text today asks and answers that question in no uncertain terms. Paul says, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" What's the answer? How do we avoid the ditch of works righteousness (everything depends on our good works) on the one side and the ditch of lawlessness (no good works are required)?

The first Sunday after Epiphany (January 6) commemorates the Baptism of our Lord. Many wonder why Jesus was baptized since He did not need the benefits which baptism gives. Jesus does not come to be baptized for His benefit, but for ours. In His baptism, Jesus is declared to be the Son of God. By being baptized, Jesus unites Himself to baptism. When we were baptized, we were baptized into Christ – into union with Him.

Our text says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death.” In baptism, we have been united with Christ in His death. In baptism, our sins have been nailed to the cross of Christ. That means, by being baptized, we receive what the cross earned: forgiveness for those sins.

The text goes on to say that, by being baptized into Christ and being united to His death and burial, we have also been united to His resurrection. Paul says, “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Jesus received new life in His resurrection. In baptism, we are united with that power of Jesus’ resurrection. God gives us the power which the resurrection brings: an entirely new life.

The Christian life is neither trying to earn forgiveness by good works nor avoiding a godly life with God’s grace as an excuse. The Christian life is simply living in our baptisms. Baptism is the heart and soul of our Christian life. That’s why we have the baptismal font front and center here. It is not to get in the way as we come to communion, but to remind us that it is the way that we come into the Christian life.

When you find yourself leaning to the ditch of works’ righteousness and you feel the guilt and burden of your sin, don’t try harder to be better at obeying the Ten Commandments. Return to your baptism – to the death and burial of Jesus Christ where there is power - and receive forgiveness for all of your sins. Receive that forgiveness in your ears through the reading and proclamation of the Word of God. Receive that forgiveness in your mouth as the Word made flesh gives you His flesh and blood to eat and drink.

And, having been forgiven, it's time to start living. No more excuses for our sin. It's time to stop justifying our sinful behavior and rationalizing our failures as if we are powerless to do anything differently. Worship regularly to receive the gifts of God. Give sacrificially to support the ministry of God. Serve your neighbor wholeheartedly – in our congregation, in your family, and in your community – to please God. Live godly and obedient lives.

When you find yourself drifting to the ditch on the other side of the road – the ditch of lawlessness - and you begin think you can live any way you want because God will love you anyway or you can freely sin because God will forgive you anyway, remember Paul's words, "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" Return to your baptism – to the resurrection of Jesus Christ – where there is power to walk in newness of life and use that power to love and worship God and to love and serve your neighbor.

When you go driving, remember to stay on the road and be careful to avoid all ditches – ditches on the right and ditches on the left. Ditches mean injury, destruction, and even death. When you live, remember to stay on the way – Jesus Christ – who is "the way, and the truth, and the life" and the only way to the Father. Be careful to avoid the ditch of work's righteousness which says your life and actions figure into your salvation and the ditch of lawlessness which says your life and actions have no connection to your salvation. You have been baptized into Christ. You have died to sin with Christ. You have been raised to new life with Christ. Live that new life with the forgiveness that comes from His death and the power that comes from His resurrection. Amen.