

Baptism of Our Lord, January 8, 2023
 “Something New” (Matthew 3:13-17)

Today is January 8. It’s still very early in the New Year, but if you’re like me, many of your New Year’s resolutions have already been thrown out the window. You know what I’m talking about, but to help drive home this point, I thought you might enjoy hearing one person’s resolutions – not just for the past year, but for New Years past.

2020: I will try to be a better husband to Wanda.

2021: I will try not to leave Wanda.

2022: I will try for reconciliation with Wanda.

2023: I will try to be a better husband to Cindy.

Or how about this one?

2020: I will get my weight down below 180.

2021: I will watch my calories until I get below 190.

2022: I will follow my new diet religiously until I get below 200.

2023: I will try to develop a realistic attitude about my weight.

What is it they say about the road paved with good intentions?

The new year always gives us a chance to look at where we are and where we want to be. It allows us the opportunity to set goals for ourselves, to change the way things are, and begin something new. But you know as well as I do that, in reality, these changes are hard to follow through. St. Paul was right when he wrote to the Romans: *I don’t do the things I want to do, but the things I don’t want to do are the very things I do.*

Paul was speaking from an early Christian perspective, but we still stand in Paul’s shoes today. Because of our sinfulness, because of the weakness and frailty of our human condition, we could be cut off from God completely and doomed for all eternity – except for one thing: we are baptized.

It is said of Martin Luther that when he was feeling overwhelmed by his own inadequacy and sinfulness, he would remind himself, *I am baptized*. Now, there’s nothing magic about those words, but because of the power of our baptism, God sustains us in life’s challenges and gives us hope for the future. In the waters of baptism, something new, something wonderful, happens. We are adopted by God and made his children throughout eternity. That is the promise contained in those waters. And every time we have a funeral, we hear that promise again: *When we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death. And the promise continues: ...so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new 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.*

Baptism, you see, makes us into something new. It takes us as we are – sinful and broken human beings – and transforms us into people of hope and promise. Baptism is our initiation into a new way of life: a life of faithful discipleship, generosity, compassion, and love for God and others. It makes us into people who think, speak, live and act in ways that represent to the world the image of Christ.

Now, this doesn't mean there won't be temptations and trials along the way. There certainly will be. But because of our baptism, because of whose we are (God's children), when we fail and fall short of God's glory, we can begin again. Martin Luther said that every day when we wash our face we should remember our baptism. Through repentance, every day our old selves can die and we can be born anew in Christ. Only because we are baptized can we do this. So, you see, baptism is not simply a one-time event, but a life-long process of dying and rising; a life-long process of growing in faith and commitment. Therefore, for the baptized Christian, every day can be New Year's Day.

Today, we read the account of Jesus' baptism by John and, in that, find a model for our own baptism. But Jesus was different, we might argue He was the sinless Son of God. Why did he need to be baptized? Well, the answer is that he didn't. However, he chose to accept this baptism on our behalf. His baptism of repentance was not for *his* sin. It was a baptism of repentance on *my* behalf and *your* behalf – just as he died on the cross, not for his sins, but for yours and mine. He was baptized so that he could be in solidarity with us, so that he could identify with and stand alongside those who do need to submit to a baptism of repentance.

His baptism was also a point of transition. At his baptism was when his mission began. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness where he was tempted and tormented by the devil. From there, he gathered together his disciples and began his ministry of proclaiming the kingdom of heaven to all who would hear. Baptism was, in a sense, Jesus' ordination. It is our ordination, as well – a time of transition. Baptism makes us something new. It transforms our lives and leads us into faithful discipleship and servanthood. It provides our entrance into a covenant community that is called to follow Jesus' example. Our baptism into the name of him who stood with and died for us sinners leads us into new life – a new beginning.

Jesus did make baptism something new, didn't he? The Jews had baptized Gentiles for centuries. It was a ceremony of cleansing, of grafting them into the Jewish community. In his final commission to the disciples, Jesus called them to *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*. Jesus made baptism something new. Just as he transformed the Passover meal into Holy Communion, just as he transformed and gave new meaning to the OT Scriptures, he made baptism a new thing.

And baptism can make us into something new. Through this Sacrament, God promises to bind himself to us in love, to bring us within the community of faith, and to adopt us as precious children whom God will never abandon. He promises that he will be our God, that he will love us, forgive us, nurture us, and stay with us. And this promise is real. The water seals it.

So whatever pain or hardship we might experience in this life, whatever we do, we can't make God stop loving us. My friends, may you live in the relationship God has created with you in your baptism. May you know and respond to the love that is offered, and in that love, may you find healing and hope. Amen.