



Pastor Steven Billings

Sermon for The Baptism of Our Lord
January 9, 2022

The Umbilical Cord of Baptism

Luke 3:15–22

¹⁵ *As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ,* ¹⁶ *John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”* ¹⁷ *His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”* ¹⁸ *So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.* ¹⁹ *But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done,* ²⁰ *added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.*

²¹ *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened,* ²² *and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”*

If you were to attend a worship service in the chapel at the seminary in Fort Wayne – as I shall do in a couple of weeks, God willing – you would notice very quickly that you have to pass by the baptismal font as you enter the nave. There’s good theology behind this placement, for the baptismal font is the passage of entry into the Church of Christ and the Kingdom of God.

Today’s Gospel contains the account of the baptism of our Lord. “When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened” (Luke 3:21). Jesus came to baptism in order to prepare the way for your own entry into its waters. Today I hope to convince you that baptism is the most precious thing that has ever happened to you, that “there is no greater comfort on earth than baptism” (Luther), that our baptismal font is well-placed right here in the middle of everything we do in the Divine Service.

I decided a few years ago that my father was right all along: I really would forget my head somewhere if it wasn’t attached. You can ask my wife how many times I’ve had to return to the house – sometimes before even getting to my car – to get my keys . . . or my wallet . . . or my *you-can-fill-in-the-blank*. I like what one man said about your brain, how it’s not really in your head; it’s actually where you sit down. Think about it: You go into another room to get something, and as soon as you’re there, you haven’t a clue what you went in there for . . . *until* . . . you go back and sit down. Then, like magic, you remember exactly what you wanted. You see? Your brain might actually be where you sit down instead of in your head.



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Well, a number of years ago, I began the habit of putting things I need to remember to bring with me right in the middle of my path. If I need to bring something to church, I lay it on the floor right in front of the door. I would literally have to stumble over it to leave the house.

This is one of the reasons for the baptismal font being placed where it is. I know that from time to time it has to get moved, but I must confess that I don't like it. I like the fact that it's in the way. Often we have to work around it, but I think that's okay. Hopefully, as it sits right in your line of vision, it'll remind you of your baptism. All of us here – the pastors included – desperately need the ongoing gifts that baptism gives. By the way, if you've never been baptized, talk to us. We can help with that. For everyone who *has* been baptized – and that's most of you – I beg you to learn more and understand more about this heavenly gift that God has given you.

People who don't understand baptism properly are like someone who gets a car as a gift, but has no keys. They possess something great, but it just sits there, idle and useless. Ah, but if you have the key! . . . now the car serves you in so many ways. Much the same way, baptism serves you greatly – if you'll only make use of it. The key is to learn more about it.

What else can we compare this great and precious gift to? Baptism is like an umbilical cord. An umbilical cord connects a mother to her unborn child. Through it she provides everything that child needs – food, water, oxygen. The cord is also used to remove all the poisons the child generates – digestive waste, carbon dioxide, and so on. If the umbilical cord ever got severed, the child would die.

When God connects you to Christ through baptism, it's as if He gives you an umbilical cord to Jesus. Through baptism, Jesus provides you with everything you need for life, and He removes from you every poison of sin within you. If this baptismal link between you and Jesus ever gets severed, your spiritual life will die. As Jesus said in John 15, "Apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

I know you already know that you're not perfect. If you're anything like me, you have constant reminders of how imperfect you are. You know, better than anyone else, the thoughts, words, and deeds of which you're ashamed. And, perhaps, through your struggle against temptation, you've come to realize how deeply ingrained your imperfections are. Beauty may be only skin-deep, but sin runs straight to the bone. You know, the Apostle Paul came to terms with this and confessed, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing" (Rom. 7:18-19).

Sin *is* like a poison that your body keeps generating. Just like stale breath or digested food, you must actively and persistently eliminate these things. If you don't, they'll poison you and you will die. You can never stop exhaling. You never outgrow your need to visit the bathroom. And you also never get away from needing cleansed of your sin. If you're not cleansed, if you're not purified, your sin will poison you and kill you. As God said



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through the prophet Ezekiel, “The soul that sins, it will die” (Eze. 18:4). Remember what Paul wrote to the Romans: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

Like a child in the womb, you’re completely helpless by yourself. By yourself, you cannot eliminate the poison and death caused by your sin. Without God’s help, without being connected to Him in some way, you’re doomed.

This is precisely the gift of baptism! In baptism, God has joined you to Christ, as if by an umbilical cord. Through this cord – through this baptism – God eliminates your sin! He draws out of you all that poison. And, as a mother absorbs her child’s toxins into her own body, so also has Jesus absorbed all your sin into His body. Indeed, “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus “appeared once for all to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Heb. 9:26). “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:24). “The blood of Jesus, [God’s] Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). “He appeared so that He might take away our sins” (1 John 3:5).

But, remember, an umbilical cord works two ways. Not only does the mother remove the poisons that threaten to kill the child, she also supplies everything that child needs to live. The umbilical cord delivers nutrients to the baby, constantly supplying what the child needs, so that it doesn’t just stay alive, but grows and flourishes. Without both of these – the removal of poison and the supply of nourishment – the child will not survive.

In the same way, Jesus has not just taken away the poison of your sin; He also supplies you with good things. Your sin is replaced by His sinlessness, sent to you through the umbilical cord of your baptism. His punishing death on the cross replaces the punishing death that you deserve – and you are given instead the eternal life won by Him through His death and resurrection. “Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him, through Baptism, into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Rom. 6:3-4).

Hang on to this image, dear Christian – that baptism is like an umbilical cord connecting you to Jesus. Ponder it this week. Think about all the poisonous things Jesus has removed from you by His blood, so that you no longer need to worry about their condemnation. Think about the great gifts – the life-giving and life-sustaining gifts – that He daily sends to you through your baptism. Don’t be terrified by your sins, don’t despair when you fall. Simply remember that you are baptized, and take joyful comfort in the fact that God has pledged to slay your sin for you. He has connected you to Jesus and, through this connection, He will unfailingly sustain you all the days of your life.

Of course, I’d love for the baptismal font to be in the middle of the doorway. I’d love for us to have to stumble over it as we enter our worship space. We all need to remember the power and gifts of baptism. This is not merely something that happened to you once upon a time, like a high school graduation or a broken leg. This is your link to life! Baptism is your ongoing relationship with the living God. It’s where you get connected to everything you need for eternal life.



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This is why Jesus came to be baptized, beloved. As you heard from the Gospel, “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too” (Luke 3:21). He had no sin that needed to be washed away. He had no weakness that needed to be strengthened and no disease that needed to be healed. He was baptized *for us*. Entering the water, He took up His end of the umbilical cord. By His baptism, He prepared Himself to deliver to you all the life-giving gifts you need, and to take from you all your poison and sin and death. What greater gift can there be than this? Truly, no greater comfort can be found in all the earth. This comfort is yours by the grace of God. Hallelujah! In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen