

## “Newness of Life”

*“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:2-4).*

In 2009, the small town of Linton, North Dakota fell on hard times. First, one of their largest employers went out of business and unemployment in the town skyrocketed. Then in the spring, rains came and the snow melted and two tributaries of the Missouri River overflowed their banks and completely flooded the town of 1,300 people. 70 homes were damaged and nearly every family in Linton felt the effects of the flooding in some way.

It looked like the water had caused the death of this community, but then something amazing happened: Linton came back to life. As one reporter wrote, “The sandbags are gone and most of the once-flooded prairie is lush, green pasture...Outlying businesses damaged by high water have moved back to Main Street, filling all the downtown buildings for the first time in three decades.” The flood also filled the local lake, allowing boats to once again be launched, and fishermen and vacationers to return. To put it simply, Linton, North Dakota had new life. When asked to explain the town’s resurrection, the president of the Linton Chamber of Commerce, called the comeback, “revitalization through devastation” ([www.commerce.nd.gov/news/detail.asp?newsID=409](http://www.commerce.nd.gov/news/detail.asp?newsID=409)).

“Revitalization through devastation” is a great phrase! In fact, “revitalization through devastation” is the theme of today’s text from Romans. In this reading, Paul talks about restoration coming out of destruction, about new life coming from death and he connects all of these things to the sacrament of Holy Baptism. This is an important text for us to understand because in so many ways, Baptism stands at the center of Lutheran theology. According to Jesus’ words in Matthew 28, it is one of the ways that disciples are made (28:19). In Acts 2:38, Peter proclaimed that Baptism works the forgiveness of sins. In Mark 16:16, we are told that Baptism is a means through which salvation is offered to mankind. In Galatians 3, Paul tells us that in Baptism we are “clothed” with the righteousness of Christ, and in the book of Titus we hear that in Baptism God works through the Holy Spirit to bring about rebirth and renewal (3:5). To put it simply, through the Word of God connected to the water of Holy Baptism, the Spirit delivers everything that Jesus died to give us and also creates the faith to receive His gifts, and the doctrine of Holy Baptism is one of the most vital and critical teachings of the Christian faith. But there’s another aspect to the Bible’s teaching about Baptism that is absolutely essential for us to understand...and it is all about death. In fact, Paul’s words in Romans 6 tell us that Baptism is *first and foremost* about death, and that only when we understand the death that occurs in our Baptism, can we fully live as God’s people.

In the first verse of our reading, Paul addresses an issue that he actually introduced in the previous chapter when he wrote: “but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). Now, you need to understand that this is an incredible statement of grace! It is a word of assurance that there is no sin that God’s forgiving love can’t cover. It is meant to put our hearts at rest and calm our guilty consciences and yet Paul knew that we would take his words the wrong way. He knew all about the sinful inclinations of the human heart, and he knew that in hearing these words of the pure, extravagant grace of God – grace which increases and is sufficient to forgive even the most heinous and unthinkable sins – there would be those who would see God’s amazing grace as a license to sin. He knew that there would be those who would greet grace not with humble thanksgiving and obedience, but with the idea that since God’s forgiveness is so abundantly and freely given, then anything goes.

And to this twisted and damning logic Paul says in the first verse of our reading, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!” (Romans 6:1). Paul’s words here are forceful and emphatic. And, as Paul explains why this thinking is so foolish, he does it in the language of death. “How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Romans 6:3). In this rhetorical question Paul makes an important connection and it’s a connection that doesn’t come naturally to us so please listen closely: *In God’s dealing with us, death always comes first!* In fact, that’s what Baptism is all about!

It’s hard for us to wrap our minds around this concept. So often, we think of Baptism only in terms of our adoption into God’s family, and especially for us Lutherans where Baptism is usually connected with a baby being brought to the font, the thought or mention of death just doesn’t seem to fit and might even seem distasteful. And yet, that is exactly where Paul goes. In fact, that is where Paul *must* go because Baptism is more than a just a sentimental ceremony in

front of the church and it's more than a public confession of faith and it's more than a vow of faithfulness. First and foremost, Baptism is about death! It is the means by which God connects us to the Cross of Jesus Christ and in Holy Baptism His death becomes ours. That's what Paul means when writes in verses six and seven, "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin."

In Baptism, God joins us to the Cross of Christ where the punishment for our sin was dispersed, where our guilt was removed, where our sin died...and this death to sin changes us! Paul says, "We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him."<sup>10</sup> For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.<sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." These words tell us that, in Baptism, the believer dies with Christ and comes out on the other side *a new person*. Commenting on this truth, one scholar writes that, "in a spiritual sense (the believer) passes through a death, dies to sin, is really, totally, dead to sin. But this dying and being buried with Christ has the purpose...that we also should walk in newness of life...and in this new life we are supposed to walk, to have our conversation, and to show it in all the acts of our daily life. *The salvation of which we become partakers in Baptism works sanctification in us.*"

If you're like me, this talk about the new, sanctified life of the Baptized believer can be a little confusing because so often our lives don't feel any different from those around us and they don't always look very sanctified. In fact, more often than not we find ourselves falling back into the same old sins that have always caused us problems. Luther was keenly aware of this struggle and he wrote about it saying, "We are in sin until the end of our life. For this reason Augustine says: 'Until our body is raised to life and death is swallowed up in victory, our evil desires will afflict us.' Likewise we read in Galatians 5:17: 'The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would.' And..." Luther writes, "...in this way all the apostles and saints confess that sin...remains in us, until the body returns to ashes and a new one is raised up without sin."

The truth is that death to sin is an epic and lifelong struggle against the flesh that clings to our bones and against the inherited sin of Adam and Eve that still hides in our hearts...and this is why Baptism is so important in every day of our lives. Even though Baptism is a one-time occurrence in the life of the Christian, it is an ongoing reality to which we must return each and every day. What does this mean? In the words of Luther it means that in our new life as believers our sinful nature must be, "drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death" and that "the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous." So, as long as we live on this earth, we must deal with the "our sinful nature" and we can do that only through the connection to Christ's death that comes in true repentance. God promises new life, but that life can only come through death and that death is never something that we would choose. Confronting and confessing our sin is uncomfortable. Honesty is painful and it is something our sinful nature will always fight. But in confession and in heartfelt repentance our sins are taken back to the Cross, they are turned over to our Substitute, they are crucified with Christ, and we are given the power to live a new life! In other words, through the confession of sin and the forgiveness of God that always follows, we experience, "Revitalization through devastation!"

My friends, each day we can die to sin believing that God will see us through our struggle! This means that we can be honest with each other about our failings and we can tell the truth about our flaws and we can confess our sins to God and to each other confident in His promise that, "if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (Romans 6:5).

After devastating flood waters, the people of Linton, North Dakota experienced new life. And in the waters of Baptism, we too have new life. We have been connected to the Cross. We have been joined with Christ in death and God has promised us that we will rise again. May God keep you in this faith, as you live in the struggle and die each day to your sin and walk in the newness of life...now and forever. Amen.

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