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Serm01277 for 2-18-24, First Sunday of Lent, Purple

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22

# A Journey toward Life

We talked on the first Sunday of Epiphany about baptism, and on this first Sunday of Lent I want to return to that same subject. I said on Baptism of the Lord Sunday that baptism is a mark of membership into God's family, the Church. It has also become the acceptable way for believers to acknowledge their new relationship to God after professing their faith in Jesus. But even then, because of baptism's symbolisms brought forward from Judaism, there remain to this day questions about baptism.

Take this little story about a baptism in rural Georgia. From what I was told, it was one of those arrangements in which the deacons have to move the pulpit and lift the floorboards to expose the baptistery. Sheets were hung over wires to form a "dressing room" on each side of the baptismal tank. The husband had already been baptized and returned to change into his clothes when his overweight wife descended the rickety stairs to the water. But the last step cracked and collapsed under her. As she lunged forward staggering past the pastor, her arms wildly flailing out for something to grasp, she caught the sheet on the opposite side and tore it down, exposing her shocked husband to the whole congregation. As he stood there without his robe, he made a quick and stunning decision. Diving headfirst into the baptistery, he disappeared for safe hiding.

It may be one of the few cases where baptism actually "saved" someone.

If we could go back and ask Peter his own thoughts about baptism I think he would point to our Scripture today as being instructive.

First, I believe Peter is helping us understand the connection between baptism and salvation. I must repeat this again: Baptism is not an act through which we save ourselves; that can and was only accomplished by the sacrificial death of Jesus. Our Scripture states, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. " I We profess our belief and are saved, and baptism provides a way for believers to respond thankfully to God's gracious act. In other words, it's not what we do to save ourselves, but what we agree to in faith and belief in Jesus that opens the door to the salvation process. This is the "pledge of a good conscience toward God" of which Peter speaks.

Although our text takes up the larger subject of the association of salvation with baptism, it is the willingness of those who go through the water that God honors. That is why Peter speaks of Noah's family who is literally saved from God's destruction through the water as being a prefiguring of baptism. This tells us that it is an act "a pledge of good conscience " that God honors, but shouldn't be confused in any way with water saving anyone.

Second, during Lent our thoughts move to the suffering of Jesus for the sake of lost sinners. At first glance this doesn't seem like it has any connection to baptism, but I ask us to reconsider. The context of Peter's epistle moves from suffering for the purpose of doing good to focus on the text we read, where "Christ died for sins once for all ... to bring you to God. "

The symbolism of Christ's death in this Scripture and resurrection are remembered in baptism. Water, that ancient symbol of chaos and death is sanctified by the power of God to use it now to bring forth new life, resurrected life from sinners formerly dead to God. The symbolism of struggle and suffering comes with our pledge of a good conscience. Repenting of

1 | Peter 3:18a (NV)

## Devotional Thoughts

* Baptism is our response to the saving faith we have in Jesus Christ our Lord.

A "pledge of a good conscience" is our vow to follow Christ and put sin behind us. Much like the promises of children, we still have problems with our vows, but it is God's faithfulness that we trust in.

* If Jesus was willing to suffer unto death, then what should that example say to us about our willingness to give ourselves frilly for Christ' s sake?

 We can live lives of servitude, where we begrudgingly serve Christ out of guilt and bitterness at having to do so—or we can live a life of servanthood, one where we acknowledge the great love of our Savior and seek to live in that same love and joy with which he served.