

Baptized into God's Greater Story

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God's Greater Story / Baptism / Romans 6:1–11; Romans 6:12–23

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever caught your reflection in a window?

It can happen in a moment. Your husband has taken the kids outside to play and to give you some time of quiet. You're sitting down to pay some bills, work on the budget, and sort through the piles of papers on the desk. After about an hour or so, you stop working to get something to drink. You go to the kitchen and pause to look out the window. Your kids are running around in a circle. Your husband is running around in the middle trying to catch them. As you turn to go back to the desk, the light suddenly changes and...for a moment...you see your reflection in the glass. There you are, in the middle of the circle, with your husband. Your children are running around, laughing, and you are caught up in their joy. Seeing your reflection in the glass, even if only for a moment, changes the way you return to your work. The drudgery of bills and the details of budgeting are just one small part of a larger story. A story where God has taken you, surrounded you with a family, and brought you into the joy of life.

I'd like to focus on a moment like that this morning. A moment when you catch your reflection in the glass. We come here physically or virtually this morning from many different places. Some of you are struggling with loneliness, others with depression, others with a myriad of health concerns. Some of you have just started a job, while others of you are anticipating college for the first time. Regardless of where you are in life, where you have been or where you think you are going, God has brought you to this place. Today, he asks you stand here and look through a window. To glance for a second at the of the Apostle Paul.

As I mentioned last week we are going to be reading from Paul's letter to the Romans for the next few months. It's a missionary letter, written to a church that Paul had never visited. Yet, in his words, Paul offers a vision of God at work in the world. Paul may not know these people, but he does know their God and the way their God works in the world. Knowing that, Paul gives them a glimpse of a greater story of God. He trusts that when they hear the greater

story, they will catch their reflection in the glass. They will see how God has brought them into something greater than living in Rome in the first century AD.

God's word is like that. It changes how you live. It reveals to you something bigger than yourself and makes you part of something larger than your life. It worked like that then and it works like that now.

Centuries have passed since Paul first wrote this letter. Rome has fallen. Empires have come and gone. The way we relate to the world and one another has changed. Yet the work of God continues. God is still at work through his Word and Spirit. And so, we come to meditate on God's Words to the Roman Christians. To stand at the window and look across the centuries. Starting last week with Romans 5 we will read to the end of the letter. Week after week, we will see the story of God unfold. Today, we begin with God's work in baptism. The way God joins us to the power of the resurrecting Christ. Then, we will focus on God's greater story, God's greater people, and God's greater plan for you.

Come. Listen. Watch, as God makes you a part of his larger story. Catch your reflection in the glass. It will change the way you live in God's World.

Last week we started in the middle of the letter. Oh, how strange. It catches you off guard. It would be much easier to start at the beginning. To hear Paul, introducing himself to the Romans, and then to follow the flow of the letter. Today we hear Romans 6. Why?

Because sometimes that's the way God works in the world. We are brought into the middle of an on-going conversation. We overhear people talking and, over time, discover who they are. Our family in Christ. When you were born as an infant, you entered a world already set in motion. You didn't know who people were as they passed you from person to person in the hospital. Over time, however, you recognized voices those that love you. You put stories together as you grew up. Strangers became family and a simple gesture could remind you of love.

In a similar way, God's work does not start with you. No, you have been brought into God's family. You were not there in the very beginning. God alone existed. He existed before anything else was made. And God alone created this world out of nothing. He spoke and the purple maple tree appeared. Mountains soared. Waves crashed. After preparing a world for creatures to discover, after preparing a garden for his creatures to live in, after preparing food for them to eat, day and night for them to rise and sleep. God took the dust of the earth, formed it, fashioned it, and breathed into it the breath of life. God made Adam and Eve and brought them into his story.

What God did at the first creation; he continues to do in a new way for each generation. Although Adam and Eve sinned and brought death, the punishment of sin, into the world, God continued to work. He sent his Son, Jesus, to bear the punishment of death, and to prepare a place for his people. A new creation. A place free from death. A place where God's people will

rejoice in the goodness of God and the wonder of a new creation. In Baptism, God brings people into His story. God gathers people from all ages and places, from all languages and cultures, into his Kingdom. The infant in arms and the aged at her deathbed. God brings all people into his story through the waters of Baptism. In baptism we are joined to the death and resurrection of Christ and there we enter the middle of the story. This story reaches back before creation, when God loves us before the foundations of this world, and this story reaches forward to a new creation when Christ will return and restore all things.

God's story doesn't begin with you and it doesn't end with you. But it does include you. By grace, you have a place and a purpose, and you are part of a people. And to understand that, to understand how God brings you into his much larger story, it is helpful to start in the middle of Paul's letter. Because here Paul brings you to the waters of Baptism and there you see what it means to be buried into the death and resurrection of Christ.

Paul describes this moment most clearly when he writes:

English Standard Version Chapter 6

the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. That is what you are. This is a hard truth for us to hold onto. God's work is eternal. This promise of God is certain and lasts for all time. But sometimes it is hard for us to hold on to this truth of who we are. It is as if this is only a moment for us, especially as Lutherans.

For example, ask any Lutheran about their Christian life experience and I would say that these are not the first words off their lips. Romans 6 is not the text that people will loudly proclaim. Many will quote or allude to Paul, but it will be from Romans 7

English Standard Version Chapter 7

19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

This life is a struggle, this internal division, this fighting of the flesh and the Spirit, this is a typical way for Lutherans to speak about Christian life. Yet, Paul this morning asks us, for a moment, to say something else about ourselves. Paul says,

English Standard Version Chapter 6

consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Sometimes you wonder if Lutherans have all received the same bible so that they go directly from Romans 3-7. Paul asks us this morning to peel apart those pages and to take a deep long look into the reflective pool of baptism. There we see our reflection in the waters and learn to say, "I AM DEAD TO SIN AND ALIVE TO GOD IN CHRIST JESUS!"

Let's meditate for a moment on those words. Paul has described sin with power and force in the letter to the Romans. It is a sin which enslaves, a sin which imprisons, a sin which has dominion. That sin, Paul says, consider yourselves dead to it. Paul has described God in wonder and power in Romans. This is the true God who created all things, the God who rose from the dead, the God who now reigns in the glory and wonder of heaven. The God who sends his Spirit among his people, the God who frees, the God who lives, the God who brings about a marvelous new creation. That God, Paul says, consider yourselves ALIVE to that God in Christ Jesus. Dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. For Paul this is the meaning of our baptism. As Paul says,

English Standard Version Chapter 6

4 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.

Therefore, consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

I hope you can see how different Paul's ways are from the ways of the world. Our world recognizes the power of sin, whether they call it sin or not is another sermon. But it fights "sin" by asking us to remember it. In that it is our hope according to the world. And if we remember sin, we will hopefully avoid it later.

You go to the museum of tolerance in Los Angeles and you will find yourself taken along a route of displays. You will see the homes and streets of Nazi Germany. Your time in each space will be carefully controlled. Doors will open and lights in the next exhibit will brighten, beckoning you forward; and lights in the present exhibit will dim and doors will close shutting you in. As you make your journey, the space around you will become smaller, the rooms darker and finally you will be forced to enter one of two tunnels according to whether you are male or female. You will find yourself in a room the shape of a gas chamber. A huge concrete slab fills the center, with no place to be comfortable. The lights darken and the TV monitors brighten and you are surrounded with newsreel footage of infants thrown out of hospitals and human beings treated worse than cattle. This chamber then opens onto the present world and an exhibit on tolerance. Your memory of sin is your hope for the world.

Paul offers another way. As you read through Romans, you find that Paul takes you down this darkening hallway and sets before you the severity of human sin. You see the power of sin in the world. The power of sin in your own life. It affects all so that none are free from its dominion and all stand sinful before God. But Paul does not stop there. Paul goes deeper than that. The chamber he takes you into is one where the monitors darken and the newsreel footage stops. In the absence of light, you feel a slab of stone and hear the sound of dripping water. Paul takes you to the moment of baptism when you were buried with Christ.

Deeper than our sin and darker than our suffering lies the suffering of God. The death of Christ for the sin of the world. Those who see here see only by the light of God. This death is the

punishment of sin. And this resurrection is life and light for the world. "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." God has entered your world, taken your sin upon himself, and in his resurrection raised you to life. Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too walk in newness of life. Paul brings us from the newsreel footage of our sin that plays over and over in our minds to the wonderful reality of the death and resurrection of our Savior who takes us by the hand and leads us into a new life. We are brought into his kingdom and we live as servants of God.

For this reason, Paul calls upon the Romans then and us today to present ourselves to Christ Jesus as people who have been brought from death to life. We present our bodies, our minds, our skills, our talents, as instruments for righteousness. There is a beautiful mystery to being part of God's story. We often find ourselves amazed at what God will do. We bring our lives to God, present ourselves to him, and God uses our lives in the unfolding of his kingdom.

Maybe he's used you to bring life to a world filled with death and decay. Maybe the Holy Spirit has impacted you to bring renewed life!

As Christians, we confess that we are dead to sin and alive to Christ. And we present our bodies to God as instruments for righteousness. There is no telling what God will do through you as he works in the world.

There's a processional cross at the chapel of Concordia Seminary. I didn't pay much attention to it during my years there until Call Day 2010. It looks like a transparent piece of glass. You could see right through it if it weren't for the small figure of Christ hanging in a spot of blood. His body offered for the world. Usually, this cross stands behind the pulpit. A visible reminder of what is being preached from God's word. Sometimes, however, the cross is used in procession. When God's people celebrate epiphany, the baptism of Jesus, his transfiguration, his resurrection, his ascension. Or, when God's people celebrate moments of Christ's work in the seminary: the opening of the school year, commencement, the day candidates receive their first call. On those days, they take this cross from its place and carry it back to the baptismal font. There, joined to those waters, it begins a procession, into worship and out to the world. It doesn't happen often but when it does, something wonderful occurs.

When that cross is used in procession, it changes. Normally, as it stands behind the pulpit, you see right through it. It's transparent. Jesus hidden and revealed, one could say. But when it enters into procession the surface no longer is transparent. It becomes reflective. As the crucifer carries it through the congregation, the cross catches the world around it. Draws images from the world into itself. The cross is filled with people. People who are gathered in worship. Their faces uplifted, their mouths open in song, their hearts filled with anticipation at what is about to be done. This body of believers is all caught up there, visibly joined to the passion of Christ. If you look closely, you can see your reflection in the glass. Your life joined to Jesus. A moment that reminds you of what God does in this place.

In baptism, he has joined you to the death and resurrection of his Son. Your life is part of God's greater story. As you now stand before God about to enter the world, for a moment, you have the courage, you have the joy, you have the privilege to say, "I am dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." And you present yourself to God as an instrument for righteousness. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.