

Titus 3:4-7

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

A long, long time ago a bunch of pastors sat around saying, "We should really celebrate Jesus' birth in December. Then maybe we can shoot for a huge party for Jesus' resurrection sometime in or around April. There needs to be some space between Christmas and Easter. It took Jesus 33 years to get from his birth to his death so it should take us at least a few months." Then the pastors looked around at each other and asked, "Then what are we going to put between December and April? There's not much in the Gospels about the boy, teenager, or young adult Jesus. So what are we going to do?" Then some wise guy in the corner piped up and said, "Why don't we just toss Epiphany in there?" That how I used to picture the season of Epiphany in the church year. It can feel like filler.

The celebrations during Epiphany suffer because of it. Think about it. Christmas is easy for us. God's rescue plan has taken shape in the form of a human being. Easter is even easier (hopefully!). God's rescue plan worked. Jesus justified us. But then we get to the Transfiguration and it's a whole different animal. "I know that Jesus is all shiny," we think to ourselves. "I know he was on top of a high mountain." But why it's important and what it has to do with us... hmmm. That's a bit tougher. Then there's today. Jesus' baptism. A couple years ago, I was asked to speak at a rally full of WELS women. As a part of my presentation we went through the significant events of Jesus' life and at each event I asked the ladies, "Why is this important to you?" They got Christmas and they handled Easter. Then I asked, "What is the importance of Jesus' baptism?" And you know what happened? A roomful of about 150 women who had gone to church their entire lives just stared like at me like I had asked them to do quantum physics.

The trouble, of course, is that my version of how Epiphany came to be isn't how Epiphany came to be. The events in the season of Epiphany actually matter. How important are they? Jesus said about his baptism that it had to happen - quote - "**To fulfill all righteousness.**" (Matthew 3:15) So again - according to Jesus - if we're going to be saved, his baptism had to happen. If it had to happen, we'd better also understand *why* it had to happen. But not for the sake of historical knowledge. Please don't think you're going to show up at the pearly gates to take a multiple-choice test on Jesus' life. You're going to show up and believe or, on the other hand, not believe. Jesus' baptism is given us so that we'll be in the first group. But for faith to grow, faith needs to understand how exactly Jesus' baptism impacts "me" personally. That's where Paul's letter to Titus helps us. It tells us that Jesus' baptism makes our baptism matter.

It may seem strange, at first, to go to Titus for answers about Jesus' baptism when in Titus there isn't a word about Jesus' baptism. Titus does, however, talk about the importance of our baptism. **"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us... through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."** (v. 4-5) I've been to the spot where we think Jesus died. I've touched the rock where we think Jesus' cross was wedged to make it stand. It was an incredible moment in my walk of faith to stand there and think, "This is where it all went down. This is where sin was paid in full; where all debts were paid." I want you to notice something about this verse though. That's not what Paul talks about here. He does not say, "When Jesus appeared, he saved us on the cross." He says something very different. He says, "When Jesus appeared, he saved us through the washing." Do you see what Paul is saying? He's saying, "You don't have to go to the Holy Land to see where you were saved. It's right here - for many of us." If you want, you can go for free to the exact location where you were baptized. If you'd care to, you can touch the font that held the water that washed you forever clean. It's where all the forgiveness that Jesus won in the Holy Land became personally yours and your balance with God began to show a forever zero - you don't owe God a dime.

Seriously. Your baptism is that big a deal. Look what Paul goes on to say about this washing **"...so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."** (v. 7) Do you see it? Your washing applied to you, personally you, Jesus' work so that you are justified. Please understand something. That's a courtroom term. It's literally a legal status. Don't let it get lost in legal lawyer mumbo jumbo. Justified means that you've been acquitted of all charges. That's a legitimate legal change in status that happened in your washing. God declared you innocent. But it's not the only legal change that happened in your baptism. Keep on reading and you'll find a second legal change that happened. You became a legal heir of God. Do you know what that means? Only a person's child is a person's heir. You were adopted. That's exactly what this is. God adopted you. That's why you're an heir now.

I've had a chance to experience what that means in life in a whole new way recently. On October 15, 2012 Melanie and I went to the Calumet County Courthouse for a legal hearing called the termination of parental rights of our adoptive daughter. The hearing lasted about an hour and at the end of it Elliana's birth parents lost all legal rights to her. She no longer belonged to them in any real way. And you know how it happened? The judge declared it so and it was done. We can't wait for February. Our social worker hopes that next month we'll be able to legally and fully become her adoptive parents. And you know how that's going to happen? The judge will declare it. And in that moment she will go from having no legal parents, to being a full and complete Bourman with everything that that means including being the sole inheritor of everything that belongs to Melanie and I (not that glorious if you're wondering!). She'll be a legal and full member of our family. We can't wait for adoption day. I'm telling you that day will go down in our personal history as one of the best days of our lives in our little family of three.

That has led me to a lot of personal reflection about my own adoption day. I'm hoping you can relate to me. Has the day of my own adoption been celebrated in my personal history the same way? Why not? How is it possible that I value my heavenly family so little and I

value my earthly family so much? How is that possible? Why is it that I need to double-check my baptismal certificate to make sure I got the date of my baptism right in my head? Let's be honest. Our wedding days make the wall in pictures, but not our baptism day. Our birthdays get celebrated, but our baptisms get forgotten. That testifies to a simple truth. Our legal status wasn't changed because God was sitting in heaven saying, "I have got to get so and so into my family because spiritually they are filthy, filthy rich." The truth is that he was sitting in heaven saying, "I have got to get so and so into my family because I can't help, but love them. And it's going to take a judicial declaration to make it happen."

I want to go back to Elliana for a second. Maybe it makes you a little sad that Elliana hasn't been adopted yet. Don't be. She actually already was on October 21st, 2012. You are too. Have you ever thought about why at your washing these words are always spoken, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"? It's because in that moment you got a Father, you got a brother in Jesus, and you got a Counselor in the Holy Spirit. In that moment, you legally and eternally got a new family. You became a full and complete child of God with everything that that means including becoming an inheritor of everything that belongs to God. There's a long list of what you'll inherit. Paul mentions here eternal life. It's yours by binding legal right. You will get it.

But knowing all of that about our baptism doesn't help us understand what happened when Jesus walked into the Jordan River; and the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove; and a voice boomed, "You are my Son, whom I love." What does that have to do with you? At first glance, nothing. In fact, at first glance Jesus' baptism looks nothing at all like ours. Here's a guy coming to be baptized who was already in God's family. He didn't need to be baptized into it. Here's a guy coming to be baptized who wasn't a sinner. We all come to be baptized because we are. So how does Jesus' baptism connect to ours?

This may sound strange, but Jesus' baptism connects to ours precisely because the two baptisms are so different. Let Goldilocks help you here. Remember Goldilocks tried all three bowls and only one was just right. When you think about Jesus' baptism it's too much to say that Jesus came to be baptized because he was a sinner. He wasn't. It's too little to say that Jesus came to be baptized to show us that baptism is important. Something was actually happening in his baptism. It's just right to say that Jesus was baptized to officially take up the task of being our substitute before God.

That explains why Jesus' baptism is so different from ours. We get clean in our baptism. Jesus gets dirty. We legally become a part of God's family. Jesus gets kicked out of his family by legally taking on our sins. That's what Jesus was saying to us when he walked up to John in the Jordan. Jesus was saying in that moment, "I'm taking on the world's sin right here, right now. This is where it starts." Martin Luther always had a way with words. This is what he said about it, "Jesus became both the greatest and only sinner on earth." And he became this officially at his baptism so that we, in turn, at our baptism would be the greatest and most perfect members of God's holy family. We get clean in our baptism. Jesus got dirty.

Maybe the best way to think about the importance of Jesus' baptism would be to hypothetically erase Jesus' baptism from the history books. Seriously. What if Jesus had never been baptized? What if? Your baptism wouldn't do you lick of good. You'd be a member of some family, but not God's. You'd be on death row awaiting your execution right now, not waiting for the ultimate heavenly wedding party. Jesus is right. His baptism fulfills all righteousness. It has filled your baptism with all the meaning of his cross and resurrection. Think of it. Jesus' baptism means that your baptism leaves you #1 legally acquitted and #2 legally God's. You've been adopted. And the inheritance written into God's will is pretty sweet: eternal life. It's legal, binding stuff. So now you know. Now you get it. Today celebrate two eternity changing events in the season of Epiphany #1 Jesus' baptism, and, #2 your baptism. Amen.