

## **BAPTISM OF OUR LORD | JANUARY 12, 2025**

ISAIAH 43:1-7 | PSALM 29 | ACTS 8:14-17 | LUKE 3:15-17, 21-22

In 2023, the most recent year we have data for, congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America celebrated 25,793 baptisms. When you add in the other mainline Protestants like Presbyterians and Methodists, plus the Catholic and Orthodox churches, and let's not forget the evangelicals, you end up with, well, it's a bit early for math, but let's just say a lot. Somewhere around ten million.

But the truth is, there is really only *one* baptism. As we confess in the Nicene Creed, "We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." And the oneness of Jesus's baptism makes all the difference for us.

The one baptism we acknowledge is *Jesus's* baptism. Jesus's baptism is always primary. Every baptism that we celebrate is really just an extension of Jesus's baptism. A joining together into his death and resurrection. A participation in his life. Our baptisms are not these discrete, pop-up events happening in isolation. They happen—forgive the water pun—downstream of Jesus's baptism. So *our* baptism is really about *Jesus's* baptism.

One baptism means that you only get baptized once. Your baptism doesn't need to get topped off like a gas tank. You don't need to renew it every few years like a driver's license. And you don't need to recommit every year like all those New Year's resolutions which we've mostly given up on by now. One baptism means that once you're joined to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, there's nothing that can ever separate you. Jesus's baptism is *once and for all*.

And one baptism means the body of Christ we call the church shares the same baptism. There is not a Lutheran baptism and an Episcopalian baptism and a Methodist baptism. There is only a sharing in Christ's baptism. So don't let anyone tell you that you were "baptized Catholic" or "baptized Presbyterian" or—God help you—"baptized Lutheran." You weren't. You were baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus's baptism is once for all and *once with all*.

Acknowledging *one* baptism makes all the difference for us. Because we share in Christ's baptism, what's true of Christ becomes true of us, too. I like to think of this as the transitive property of love. If you can think back to when you took algebra in middle school—I know I am making you do math now after all—you probably learned about the transitive property. The transitive property says that if  $a=b$  and  $b=c$ , then  $a=c$ . What's true for one variable is true for the next one. These two variables are interchangeable. You can swap out one for the other.

The transitive property works in algebra. But it doesn't really work in real life. Because we're different. People have different needs and limits and gifts and constraints. What's true for one person isn't always true for the next person. What's true for one family isn't always true for the next family. What's true for one congregation isn't always true for another congregation. You can't just take what works for them and apply it to yourself.

But baptism is all about sharing. It's all about oneness. And when we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that brings us to the place where Christ is, what God

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says about Jesus now gets said about us. And what does God say about Jesus? We heard it today. “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

One baptism means that, because we are joined to Christ in the waters of baptism, what God declares about Jesus, God now also declares about you. *You are God’s beloved. With you God is well pleased.*

When we encourage people to “remember their baptisms,” this is what we’re telling them to remember. We’re not asking them to remember who was there and what kind of cake you had and how cold the water was. If you were baptized as an infant, you probably don’t remember anything at all. We’re encouraging them to remember that *You are God’s beloved. And with you God is well pleased.*

Think, for just a moment, about all the messages you get about yourself in a day. For many of us, the messages we get about ourselves whether it’s in the media or advertisements or even among our peers is that we’re not enough. We’re not productive enough. Or not attractive enough. Or not smart enough. Or charismatic enough. And so many of us spend massive amounts of time and energy trying to change or even just figure out what other people think of us.

But in our baptisms, we learn what God thinks about us and our neighbors. That we are loved. Not because of what we do or how productive we are or how smart we are or how charismatic we are. But simply because we *are*. As one of Marilynne Robinson’s characters puts it, “It’s your existence that I love you for, mainly.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus’s baptism is what begins his public ministry. Before he calls the disciples, before he feeds the five thousand, before he tells us about the good Samaritan, before the last supper, before his passion, before anything else, God publicly declares that Christ is the beloved.

And because we share Jesus’s baptism, it’s the exact same for us. The most important identity any of us have is baptized child of God. No matter what else we do in life, that always comes first.

So live out your vocations. Feed the hungry. Comfort the grieving. Strive for justice and peace in all the earth. Be the body of Christ. By all means, do all that. But before you do, remember that you are God’s beloved. And with you God is well pleased. It’s your sheer existence that God loves you for.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>1</sup> From *Gilead*.