



1st Sunday of Epiphany – January 11-13, 2025

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: Baptism Is One Gift that Stays Open; It Offers:

1 Cleansing from sin 2. Commitment from God 3. Confidence for heaven

Sermon Text: 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.

Dear friends of Jesus, who are still, I pray, enjoying the blessings of Christmas,

Let's go back to Christmas Eve. Let's just say that you received a medium-sized, professionally wrapped gift. You open it and find a solid wooden box. Lifting up the lid, you find a crisp \$100 bill. Some gift – you're thinking: Now that gift deserves a thank you. A few days later, you're looking for something in your home and you find that same box. You open the lid and surprise, surprise, you find another \$100. How'd you miss that? Maybe it was stuck under the lid. Some time later, a friend calls you and wants to meet for lunch. You happen to be a little low on cash and think of stopping by an ATM. Then, you remember the box. "Nah, couldn't happen." You grab the car keys and start to walk out the door. You get as far as your hand on the doorknob, and you freeze. You just have to check. You run back to your bedroom, find that wooden box of blessings and open it. Inside is another \$100. That is an example of a Christmas gift that keeps on giving. Wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't you want to thank the giver?

God has graciously given each of us blessings like that ... available right here, right now. Now don't go running back to your car, race home, and look for a box like I described. Instead, God has given us something better. He has given us spiritual blessings worth far more than \$100 bills. He has gifted us these spiritual blessings, all in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. What is Baptism? Simply put, to baptize means to wash with water in the name of the Triune God. Likely, we learned about baptism in Catechism Class or Bible Information Class. We learned this from Martin Luther's simple explanation that Baptism is not just plain water, but it water used by God's command and connected with God's Word. Jesus commands us to baptize every man, woman, and child when He says in Matthew, chapter 28 to: *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.* So why focus on baptism this week? We're reminded of baptism on this first Sunday of Epiphany, a time when we historically recognize the Baptism of Jesus. At his baptism, 30-year old Jesus was anointed and announced as the Savior of the world – it was the beginning of His public ministry. His baptism now reminds us of our own baptism. At our baptism, God anointed and announced to us everything Jesus Christ earned for us at His cross, forgiveness of sins, God's love in our lifetime, and a future home in heaven -- gifts that still remain ours to this day. Baptism literally connects:

heaven to earth, God to people, Jesus and His perfect sacrifice to sinners like us. When is the last time, you thanked God that you were baptized? I confess, that for me, it's been a while. Usually, we get excited about baptism the day it happens, but then baptism somehow loses its shine. So often we take our baptisms for granted, that we miss out on the priceless blessings baptism brings every day. Baptism is more than just a church ceremony, it's a means of God's grace. And baptism is a better gift than a magic wooden box. The wooden box I described at the beginning of my sermon only gave a few bucks. Baptism gives us eternity. How can you put a price tag on heaven? As we examine the inspired words of the apostle Paul to young pastor named Titus, we learn how great baptism is. Unlike most Christmas gifts you close and put away, Baptism Is a One Gift that Stays Open! It continually offers us: 1) Cleansing from sin; 2) Commitment from God; and 3) Confidence for heaven.

Just think about your car, truck, SUV or mini-van. It hasn't been winter that long, but here in Minnesota, our vehicles are going to be daily exposed to dirt, salt, and other chemicals. Our vehicles will need a good washing and a good cleaning – otherwise, they will slowly rust away. St. Paul accurately describes baptism as a washing, but not just any washing. He calls it a *washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit*. In our baptisms, God gives us more than an ultimate wash with a lemon air freshener. In baptism, God washes away the damning guilt of our sins, sins we've done years ago that we still remember, sins we done earlier today that we'd prefer to forget. And that's a truly gift we need. Think of all the gifts you received this past Christmas: a sweater, a gift card, a video game. Are there any gifts you need more than baptism? Of course not. Baptism is One Gift that Stays Open. Don't go thinking that having an extra hundred dollars is better than the forgiveness of your sins. Just compare that to a service charge of one overdrawn check. A service charge of one overdrawn check might be \$25. That one mistake could cost you some cash. But, the service charge of one sin will cost you an eternity in hell. Baptism makes all the difference. And that is the message that the apostle Paul is explaining to young Pastor Titus in our sermon reading. Titus was a pastor on the Greek Island of Crete. And the members of his church were forgetting about the ongoing benefits of baptism just like we often do. That's why Paul reminded them: *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*. In Baptism, we are reborn and given spiritual life by the Holy Spirit. It's not like the Holy Spirit presented us with the gift of spiritual cleansing at the baptism font, and then closed the lid. Baptism Is One Gift that Stays Open – because it offers us the cleansing of all our sins. Every time we remember our baptism, we remember how God has forgiven us fully, and completely..

Baptism also gives us a special commitment from God. See that commitment in the opening words of our sermon reading: *4But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy*. In that one verse, that's the Gospel: the good news that God has forgiven us. He's already saved us. The blood stained cross and empty tomb of Jesus prove it. Our penalty of sin has been paid. And now Paul brings us in on a little secret. He tells us why. It's not because we deserve it. Do you ever think you deserve

better? I make the same mistake. I deserve better health, a better bank account, better days. But, when you stop and think about it, the only thing we deserve because of the sins we've done and left undone is to sit in the smoking section of eternity ... we deserve hell itself. Now, in this Scripture, God makes a commitment to us, an eternal one. He promises to be our heavenly Father forever. He gives us His kindness and His undeserved love – that's God's grace. And He gives us His mercy. Do you know the difference between the two. Mercy is not getting what you deserve. Grace is getting what you don't deserve. Think of it this way: let's say that someone deliberately smashes your car. Mercy is forgiving that person. Grace is buying that person who did that a car of His own. Really, that's what God did for us. We tend to sideswipe and smash God's laws. But not only does God show us his mercy and withhold his judgement, He gives us what we don't deserve: forgiveness and peace. Yes, Baptism Is One Gift that Stays Open: it brings us eternal commitment from God. Come what may into our lives: stormy weather, family troubles, cancer, even death itself – God will never leave us. May we never leave God.

And that brings us to our final point why Baptism Is a One Gift That Stays Open. It gives us confidence for heaven. That's what the final words of our reading mean: *7so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.* Think of it this way: a twenty year old carefully opened a huge gift from her grandparents. Inside was a mound of packing peanuts. Digging through the sea of Styrofoam, she finally found keys with a note attached. It read: "This house is yours upon graduation." She could hardly hold back the tears. She still had a few semesters to go before she'd be able to walk inside her first house as a home owner. But she knew that graduation and the house were real and right around the corner. That's what happens to us in Baptism. We're part of the rich family of God .. and God has something better planned for us than a deluxe apartment in the sky. We're heirs of salvation. God gives us the gift of heaven. It's ours right now. We still might have a few semesters of life to go, but heaven is real and right around the corner. Certainly, Baptism is One Gift that Stays Open.

Don't close it. Keep it in front of you, like we do with the baptism font here in church. Do you notice we never hide it and push it out of the way? Instead, it's front and center. It reminds us why we can worship God, why we can serve God, and why we have reason to share Him with others. Don't bother looking if it can give you \$100 bills. Instead, remember what it does for us. It gives us eternal hope. And that's worth everything. So put away the tree. Put away the presents. But, don't ever put away your Baptism. Baptism Is a One Gift that Stays Open. Amen.