

February 21, 2024 – 1 John 3:1-3 & John 1:9-14

A number of years ago, I attended a pastors' conference. And the theme of this pastors' conference was youth ministry and catechesis. And I was really excited to attend. Not only was it a great topic, but one of the keynote speakers was Dr. Ken Ham, the founder of Answers In Genesis. Who, at the time, had recently written a book about the departure of young people from the church.

But it was the other keynote speaker who actually made the bigger impression on me. His name was Mark Oestreicher. He was not a pastor. He was not a Lutheran. Everything about him screamed non-denominational evangelical. And so, at first glance, he didn't seem to be a great fit with a bunch of LCMS pastors.

And I think he might have felt the skepticism in the room. Because when he got up on stage, he began his presentation by saying, "I know we come from different theological backgrounds and I can't guarantee we agree on everything. But I want you to know this: I believe that baptism is more than just a symbol. I believe it a spiritual washing of rebirth. That in baptism, God forgives sins and makes us his children. And I believe that youth ministry must be rooted in teaching that baptismal identity."

He got a literal standing ovation. Every pastor in that room stood up and applauded what he had just said. And every bit of hostility melted away. Because if we could agree on our baptismal identity, then we had more than enough common ground to agree on a whole host of other issues.

And that's a good way of describing what baptism gives us. A new identity. Baptism isn't just an action that is done to us once and then doesn't matter anymore. Baptism is an identity.

I've heard it compared to marriage. When two people get married, afterwards they don't say, "I was married." Because that would imply that the marriage has ended. You were married, but through death or divorce, you are no longer married.

No, instead, when you get married, you say, "I am married." Because marriage has an ongoing effect. It has changed your identity, in a way. What was once two people is now one person, joined together by God himself. That union changes you. You may have gone through a marriage ceremony on a particular day, but that doesn't mean you were married. From that day forward, you are married.

The same is true of baptism. You were baptized on a particular day. But you also are baptized from that day forward. It has changed you. It has given you a new identity.

Luther liked to talk about this change of identity as that of the Old Adam and the new man. He writes in the Small Catechism, "What does such baptizing with water indicate? It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

The Old Adam is your old identity. And it is a sinful identity. A selfish identity. A worldly identity. And I don't think it's over stating it to say that it's a Satanic identity. Because it's an identity that listens to Satan's lies. That gives in to Satan's temptations. That pursues Satan's goals. Luther calls this identity "the Old Adam" because it's the same identity that listened to the serpent in the Garden of Eden and agreed with him that eating the fruit was a good idea, despite God's command to the contrary.

The new man is your baptismal identity. It is the identity that daily rejects the sins that the Old Adam does. Daily confesses them in contrition. Daily repents of them and desires to turn away from them. The new man is clothed in Christ's righteousness and purity and so the new man knows that the Old Adam is powerless. God doesn't see us as the Old Adam anymore and so the Old Adam is dead. Drowned in those same baptismal waters.

Which is a wonderful comfort in the midst of our guilt. Satan, the Accuser, cannot burden us with the sins of the Old Adam because the Old Adam is already dead in God's eyes. He was nailed to the cross with Jesus Christ. Buried in the grave along side of Christ's dead body. And when Christ rose on Easter morning, it was not the Old Adam that walked out of the tomb with him, it was the new man that walked out of the tomb. And that new man is a completely new creation.

That's what John tells us in our Gospel lesson. We are reborn in Holy Baptism. Reborn through faith in the work of Christ. Reborn by the will of God. Reborn as children of God.

And he reiterates that fact in his Epistle lesson. He reminds us, *"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."* We are purified by our hope in the resurrection. Purified in spirit by our hope in the day when we are purified in flesh as well. When the Old Adam will be no more.

And yet, if you've ever read John's first epistle, you know that it can feel a little schizophrenic. Because at one moment he'll be talking about how we are loved by God, reborn as his children, forgiven of all our sins. And the next moment, he'll be demanding that we love one another. That we help our brother in need. That anyone who hates his brother doesn't even know Jesus Christ. Back and forth he goes, with almost no transition in between.

What he's getting at though is something that Luther suggests at the end of that Small Catechism reading: "That a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." Baptism isn't just about rising from the dead. It's about living in righteousness. It's about walking in newness of life. Being a child of the light.

It's not just that you were baptized. You are baptized. And that changes how you live your life. You are reborn as a child of God. You have a new baptismal identity in Christ. And that identity acts differently than the identity of your Old Adam.

And, as John points out, that's especially true when it comes to how you treat your neighbor. Which is why, if you turn to the cover of your bulletin, the very first step in reconciliation, at the very top of the cross, is "Remember Whose You Are."

You belong to Christ. You are God's child. You have a new identity. You are different. You look at the world in a different way. You have the mind of Christ, Paul says.

The Old Adam sees someone in need and says, "That's not my problem." The new man sees someone in need and says, "I need to help him." The Old Adam sees a way to take advantage of our neighbor and says, "I'm more important." The new man sees a way to take advantage of our neighbor and say, "I should be serving him." The Old Adam gets hurt by someone and says, "I hate him for what he did to me." The new man gets hurt by someone and says, "I love him despite what he did to me."

Reconciliation between people can't happen until until you remember whose you are, because reconciliation isn't something the Old Adam knows how to do. It's not in his vocabulary. It's foreign to him. It seems foolish and dangerous and even frightening. Because the Old Adam wants power and control. And when you reconcile you give up your power. You give up control.

You turn to God and say, "I am your baptized child. I want what you want. Even if the Old Adam tells me it's foolish or dangerous or scary." And what God wants most is forgiveness. He wants us to forgive as we have been forgiven. He wants us to reconcile with others as he has reconciled with us.

Only the new man can reconcile. And the new man can only rise up after the Old Adam is drowned in the waters of baptism. Remember whose you are. Remember whose child you are. Remember whose disciple you are. Remember whose creation you are. And you silence the Old Adam and all his selfishness.

You were baptized. You are baptized. Baptized to live before God in righteousness and purity. Baptized to walk in newness of life. Baptized to live as a new man, as a new women. Baptized to love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. Amen.