

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

1 Peter 3:15-22

Stay on the Boat!

Peter urges in our text: *“Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”* He then gives the reason we can make a defense and endure suffering at the same time: baptism. Baptism is the objective, unmovable foundation of the Christian life. For this reason, when Luther faced despair, danger, or temptation, he often touched his head and declared, “I am baptized”—not “I was baptized,” but “I am baptized.”

When I was in middle school, a kind donor gave a new playground to the school, probably intended for the elementary school students. One of the best parts of the playground was a big wooden arch with a huge wooden bridge under it. The bridge could be swung back and forth. It did not take long for us boys to come up with a game that inevitably led to injuries and to the great horror of the nuns responsible for us. What was the game? One team had to pile on the bridge and the arch while the other team shook the bridge and climbed up the arch until all their opponents had fallen off. The people on the bridge and the arch, after realizing the danger much too late, were left clinging to the bridge and arch as if their lives depended on it. Yes, it was stupid, but we were stupid, so what can you expect?

Peter compares baptism to Noah’s flood. In Noah’s flood, as in baptism, it was that which destroys that saves. The same waters that brought death for many, brought life to the few who clung to God’s promise, manifested in the ark. So also, in baptism, that which destroys also saves. The same waters that drown the sinful nature, the old Adam, give rise to a new man who clings to God’s promise, manifested in baptism. The same waters that bring judgment bring pardon, all by grace. The believers on the ark were not saved because they could swim; God’s promise saved them, through the ark. Yet, if they jumped off the ark, they were responsible for their destruction. So also, in baptism we are saved by grace alone, not by anything we do; yet, if we reject God’s promise, we alone are responsible for our destruction.

“Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” I cringe when I hear the testimonials or defenses of some Christians. They are full of what God did for them, but not with what God did for them in Christ. Maybe someone quit drinking. Maybe someone became a better parent. Maybe someone became a better student. Maybe someone was healed of a sickness. Maybe someone was freed from depression. Great, but what happens when they drink again, lose their cool as a parent, fail a class, or get sick and die, as we all will. If the positive form of all these things was irrefutable evidence of God’s love, will the negative be proof of his hatred? If we base our hope on our emotions, transformations, works, or health, will we ever have a sure and certain reason for hope? No, we won’t; and that is why Peter attaches our hope to Christ, and Christ to our baptism. Thus we can say, “ But I am baptized! And if I am baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.” If you haven’t been pleading your baptism, you have been like a soldier in Iraq tossing water balloons instead of using his machine gun. Use your greatest weapon as you battle the devil and your sinful flesh. Use your baptism, because in using your baptism, you are using Christ and his Word. Thus, Luther said, “There is no greater comfort than baptism.”

Most of you have treaded water before. Some of you have perhaps even had a competition with a sibling or friend to see who can tread water the longest. If you have had such a competition, you know that human beings can tread water for a long time, but they cannot do so indefinitely. I have emphasized many times in Bible class that, in baptism, we drown our old Adam, but to be careful because he can swim. Our old Adam can easily out-tread our emotions and the other changing standards we set up to fight temptation or gauge God's love for us. He cannot, however, out-tread our baptism, because our baptism is a never-ending flood of grace.

Every confirmed member here at Christ has learned the truths of Luther's Small Catechism. You have learned the meaning of baptism for your daily life: *"Baptism means that the old Adam in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity."*

You have learned it. Have you lived it? Do you remember how your baptism washed away your sin when you bathe and wash away dirt? Do you daily arise with the conscious intention to amend your sinful actions and live anew for Christ? Do you daily relive your baptism, confessing your sins and receiving God's forgiveness?

Look up. Notice what the roof of our church building looks like. It's no coincidence that you sit in the part of the church called the nave, from which we get the English word "navy." We are fellow passengers on a ship with a holy destination. We are passengers on God's holy ark, the Church, kept afloat by the waters of baptism. Noah and his family trusted God's promise that in his grace would deliver them. Everyday they had reminders of what they would have been without God's promise, as dead carcasses floated by and the world itself was drowned. They deserved to be one of those dead carcasses as much as anyone else, for they too had sinned; only God's grace kept that from being the case. Had they rejected God's promises, those waters that kept them afloat would have been the waters that swallowed them whole.

"Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Should we reject God's promise in baptism, those waters would rightly become the waters of our judgment, and not our deliverance. We deserve nothing more than to be swallowed up in God's wrath, but we have an appeal: in baptism, we have been joined to Christ, who has taken our punishment upon himself. Thus, we can give the reason for the hope that we have by pointing to our forehead, where God's grace has been poured, his promise has been attached, and his Son's cross has been signed. Though guilty ourselves, we can plead not guilty in Christ, receiving Christ's innocence through faith, created and strengthened in baptism.

Are you ready to give the reason for the hope that you have? You are now. You can lift up your hand, touch your forehead, and say, "I am baptized." Use your baptism to chase off temptation, doubt, and the devil. Cling to your baptism, and, through your baptism, to your Lord, as if your life depends on it, because it does. *"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit."* This was done for you on Calvary and at the empty tomb. This is applied to you in baptism. Don't forget. Look up, and stay on the boat. Amen.