

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ 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, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)

He Saved Us!

Before I was pastor here, I served in Muskegon, which is right on Lake Michigan. There were many wonderful things about living near the lake shore. It was beautiful. The lake moderated temperatures both in summer and winter. We loved taking the kids to the beach. But when you live in the shadow of a Great Lake, you hear a lot of stories on the news about people being rescued by the Coast Guard. This time of year, it's often because they went ice fishing and the ice wasn't thick enough to support them, or a big section broke free and drifted out into deep water and those fisherman had no way of getting back to shore. If you were out there on that ice watching the shore getting farther and farther away, you would realize the danger you were in. You'd probably be thinking that this could be it. And then if a Coast Guard helicopter or speed boat zoomed into view, you'd know you were going to be saved. Of course, you would remember that experience. You would remember how much it meant to be saved. You would play back in your mind how those Coast Guardsmen got you off the ice and it might change the way you live after that. Could there be a better picture of us sinners contemplating the reality of death and hell, and then Jesus rescues us? That's what happened to you and to me. **Jesus saved us!**

I.

Of course, not every person the Coast Guard rescues was out on the ice drifting away. So not everyone has that opportunity to reflect on what's coming. Someone might not even realize the danger they're in, because they're unconscious or because they're very young and they don't understand. And that may apply to many of us here today. All of us were in danger of dying and going to hell. But we didn't all see how serious it was. Some of us were rescued when we were so little that we don't remember the terror. Some of us came to faith before we had to seriously contemplate going to hell. But that doesn't make the rescue any less real. Whether it happened when we were children or adults, whether it came because of a great crisis in our lives or it came in a simpler and quieter way, **Jesus saved us through baptism.**

St. Paul says, **"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us..."** From the moment God created the world, he showed kindness and love. Every day, all over the world, God shows love to believer and unbeliever alike, by providing homes and food and clothing and medical care. But this verse is saying something greater. God's love appeared. It became real and something people could touch. In fact, the Greek word Paul uses here is "epiphany" – God's love became physical for us. What is he talking about? Jesus. For thousands of years, God had promised that he would send a Savior. In Bethlehem, he kept that promise. The kindness and love of God appeared. And in Jesus' baptism, God revealed that Savior to the Jewish people and through them to the whole world. In the life, death and resurrection of Christ, the kindness and love of God have appeared in a way that surpasses every other expression of God's love.

Why did God make his kindness and love physical for us? To rescue us. Paul says, **"He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."** When the Coast Guard goes out to rescue people, they don't ask how they got in trouble or whether they deserve to be saved. They just go, often at the risk of their own lives. They don't save wealthy people first. They even do their best to rescue criminals and people who deserve to die because their own pride and stupidity made them ignore warnings about melting ice. Why do they do that? It's their duty, to be sure. But I would like to believe that they chose that life because they're people of compassion. They see people in trouble and they want to help them. That's what mercy is.

God didn't ask if we deserved to be saved or not. He knew we didn't. He knew that we were all in trouble because our pride ignored his warnings over and over again. We sin. Sometimes, our sin causes us enough heartache that we stop and ask ourselves what we can do now. We're like those people on the ice who realize they might die and kick themselves for their stupidity. But sometimes, we convince ourselves that we

haven't done anything too terrible. We think we're pretty good people. We don't sleep around. We don't do drugs. We don't rob banks or molest children. We think that God forgives us because we deserve it. We think that God forgives us because we're trying to do better so we deserve a second chance. But forgiveness can't really be earned. By definition, forgiveness is someone simply putting away our sin.

God didn't save us because we're good people. God didn't save us because he knew we'd send our kids to Lutheran elementary school and fill our church offering envelopes. God didn't save us because we deserve to be forgiven or given a second chance. God saved us because he saw that we were sinking in the freezing water of our sin and we were going to die and spend eternity in hell and our problem touched his heart. God's mercy moved him even when we were too stupid and sinful to realize we were in danger.

So his kindness and love appeared. Jesus came and he died and he rose and he took all that sin away. Then God made that ours in baptism, or as Paul says it, **“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”** The washing of rebirth is a bath that God gives us so that we are born again. Jesus said, “You must be born again ... born of water and the spirit.” In baptism, God gives us the Holy Spirit. How does that work? Well, it isn't the water. In baptism, God adds the word of the gospel. God adds the promises of forgiveness and life and that word, that gospel, makes baptism a sacrament, a work that God himself does. When we bring a child or an adult here to the font, God is the one who really works. I'm just a tool in his hands. But when God uses me to baptize, he washes away the sin of the person who is baptized.

No one can hear that promise and be the same. Even someone who rejects it, is changed by it. He or she is hardened in their unbelief. But when the Holy Spirit comes in baptism and gives us faith, he gives us a new birth. Our life starts over at that moment and we live as believers, as children of God. That new birth really is the same as coming to faith. When you came to faith, God planted a new believer in your heart. For most of us here today, that new believer came into our hearts when we were baptized as babies. But even if you were already a believer when you were baptized, the Holy Spirit still came in that washing and he still strengthened and renewed your faith to get you home to heaven. All of us were drowning in sin and unbelief. We were all on the road to hell and God rescued us. **God saved us through baptism.**

II.

Whenever those Coastguardsmen rush out onto Lake Michigan to rescue someone in trouble, they use tools to do it. In Muskegon, we could sometimes hear the helicopter roar out of the Grand Haven Coast Guard station to rescue someone. Down at the pier, you could see their boats and some of their tools. God's tool is the gospel. It comes in two forms, the word and sacrament. But our rescue always comes through that gospel. But God doesn't use that tool in a random fashion. He has a purpose. **God saved us to be his heirs.**

We aren't strangers to God. Before we knew him, he already loved us and chose us and he perfected that tool to rescue us. Paul says that God **“poured out [the Holy Spirit] on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.”** What is he talking about? First of all, he's talking about the Trinity, right? The kindness and love of God the Father appeared when God the Son was born as human child in Bethlehem. Then the Father poured out the Holy Spirit through the Son. On the day of Pentecost, Jesus poured out the Spirit on his Church. The Father worked through Jesus.

Today, in our gospel lesson, we see Jesus receiving the Holy Spirit. In his human nature, God's Son needed all the gifts for ministry that any human, even a perfect human, needs. So God gave those gifts of the Spirit in his baptism. Our baptism serves a slightly different purpose. It gives us faith and it strengthens that faith. But the person of the Trinity that works through that gospel is the Holy Spirit. In your baptism, God the Father poured the Holy Spirit out on you through Jesus. Through Jesus, because the Lord gave us baptism. And through Jesus, because the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

God poured the Spirit out on us generously. How many hours a week do you spend here? How many hours a week do you spend studying the Bible at home? And how many hours a week do you spend at work or watching TV or reading or surfing the web? If God weren't generous with the Spirit, our faith would never survive. But we are only baptized once, and in that bath God gave us the Holy Spirit. In the relatively few hours each week we spend studying the gospel, he gives us the Spirit and he does it so generously that our faith lives and moves us through all the hours we spend doing something else. Now, that doesn't mean that we don't have to keep coming back. But God gives us a generous portion of his Spirit and when trial and disaster come, our faith survives and even grows through those experiences.

Paul said that God gave us that Spirit, “**so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.**” What is an heir? It’s someone who inherits something. We often think of it after someone has died. But when you make your will you’re thinking of those heirs before you die. Of course, you’re going to give those heirs something. If you’re an heir of someone who is now living, you have the expectation that when the time comes, you are going to get something.

We are God’s heirs. We are expecting something from him, not when he dies but when we die. We will receive eternal life. That’s the gift God gave us when he washed our sins away in baptism and gave us faith. We will live forever. Not just our souls in heaven. Most people today believe that when you die you go to a better place. Even Harry Potter was told that to the well-ordered mind, death is just the next adventure. But very few people today understand the fullness of the life God has promised you. It isn’t another plane of existence. It isn’t just going to a better place. When we die, certainly, we do go to heaven. Our body is buried but our soul lives with Christ in joy. But that’s not the end. There is still one great promise of God that we will be waiting for: the resurrection.

Just as Jesus’ body rose, our bodies will rise. Just as Jesus’ body was glorified in his resurrection, our bodies, too, will be free from sin. They won’t be broken anymore. They won’t be tortured by age or disease. They will be made new. And our heart will be totally free from sin. We will rise, whole and perfect, sinless and glorified, to live a life that will be so much better than this life that God doesn’t even bother describing it to us while we live down here. That’s the inheritance we are expecting. God rescued us from a life that will always be tormented by guilt, by sorrow, by my sins and the sins of the people around me, by the grief that comes in a dying world. **God saved us to be his heirs.**

That’s worth thinking about, even if we don’t remember the day it happened. When I was a baby, my dad was in the army at Ft. Dix, New Jersey. And I have this picture of myself crawling on the beach with the ocean in the background. My dad once told me that right after he took that picture, a big wave came up and swept me off the beach. He had to run down and swim out and pull me in. I don’t remember that day. But I’m glad he did that. I don’t remember the day God claimed me in baptism either. I don’t remember despairing over sin and the fear of hell. I was a baby pulled into God’s life raft by a hand that I didn’t see and before I knew how much danger I was in. But God did pull me in. He did rescue me. And he rescued you, too, whenever it happened. Give thanks to him for the promises of life to come. Amen.