

Advent Foundations--Baptism

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[0 : 0 0] Hello everyone, welcome back to Foundations. This is session two. This week we are going to be focusing on the sacrament of baptism, which is very closely related to what we talked about last week when we talked about the gospel and the story of Christianity, the Christian worldview. In order to understand baptism, we first have to understand something about the relationship between the material world and the spiritual world. We need to understand what it means to have a sacramental worldview. Essentially, the first point is this. Matter matters. Matter is extremely important in God's economy. We see that in a number of places. First, we can look at creation. God creates everything that exists and then he pronounces it good. We see this in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. God loves his creation. He loves the physical world. He loves the universe that he has created and he pronounces it all good. And we believe that, and we read this in Romans chapter 1, that God is set apart from creation. He is separate from his creation. And at the same time, his creation points to him. So all of creation testifies to and glorifies God as the creator.

Again, Paul talks about that in Romans chapter 1. We also see that matter matters when we look at the incarnation. We see God taking on flesh. We see God becoming flesh and blood and bone. We see the nature of Jesus as being both fully human and fully divine. We see matter and spirit coming together in Jesus in a unified way. Now we'll talk a little bit more about that later on when we talk about Jesus in more detail. But thirdly, we see matter matters in the resurrection, the truth of the resurrection. When Jesus was resurrected, he had a physical body and he still had holes in his hands and feet and side.

His physical body was raised to new life. And we believe, and we read this in scripture in places like 1 Corinthians chapter 15, Revelation chapter 21, we believe that Jesus' resurrection is a preview of what God intends to do for the whole world, that he will renew and restore this physical world, and that we will be given resurrection bodies. All of this tells us that from God's perspective, matter, physical matter, is extremely important. And in addition to that, the spiritual realm is equally important, that both are intended to interact with one another.

And this really pushes against two common views that we see in the world that tend to pit the physical and the spiritual against one another. So materialism is the view that the physical world is the only world that exists. The only world that is real is the physical. And that is a predominant view in the late modern West. Many people, most people, are materialists. They believe that the only thing that is real is the physical world. Now there's another view that sort of contrasts with that, spiritualism. This is the belief that only the spiritual world is truly good, and that the physical world is a place from which we one day hope to escape. The physical world is bad, it is inferior, and our hope should truly be to transcend the physical and to become spiritual beings. And you see that in the Gnostic traditions and some of the Eastern religions. You see that running throughout history as well. A sacramental worldview is neither materialism nor is it spiritualism.

A sacramental worldview says that the physical and the spiritual are inseparably joined. They are inseparably linked. And what we believe more specifically regarding the sacraments is that God works spiritual ends through physical means. That God is able to work spiritual ends through physical means. What we believe when we look at redemption is that redemption is about restoring the physical creation. That grace perfects nature. I love how Leonard Van Der Zee puts it. He says this, For the believer, the universe is a sacramental place where everything from the flash of lightning and the crash of thunder to the industry of the ant, from the passionate embrace of husband and wife to the sun's slow arc through the sky, shows us God's glory and love and is further hallowed by Christ's own embodiment. So in a sense, all of creation points to and glorifies the creator. Now, what are the sacraments? When we talk about specifically the sacraments that we practice in the church, baptism and the Eucharist, what are the sacraments and how do we understand them?

[5 : 40] According to our catechism, which you are reading as a part of this class, the question, what are sacraments? And here's how our catechism answers it. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. God gives us the sign as a means by which we receive that grace and as a tangible assurance that we do in fact receive it. So it's an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Now there's a development of thought on the sacraments and the relationship between the sign and the thing signified that we can look at in history. For roughly a thousand years or more, up until the medieval period, we had what we call the great tradition. And the great tradition saw that there was an overlap between the sign and the thing signified. They weren't one and the same, nor were they completely separate. But there was a relationship between the sign and the thing signified. Participating in one was a participation in the other. When the medieval church arose, thinkers like Thomas Aquinas began to pull those two things together more and more closely. And so what we have emerged as a view that sees the sign and the thing signified as being one and the same. And then there was a correction to that that came along in the post-Reformation memorialist view that saw a total separation between the sign and the thing signified. And there was no participation, no interrelationship.

One simply pointed to the other, but was in no way related to the other. And so what arose is really a spectrum of Christian beliefs about the sacraments. And we make some comparisons here, but we do it with a lot of respect. We know that there are a variety of traditions represented in our church, and people come from a variety of backgrounds. And we have great respect for all of the denominations that believe in the gospel. And this is an area where Christians have disagreed for a very long time.

But on the one end of the spectrum, we have what would be considered the, what you would often find in Baptist churches or in many non-denominational churches, which is a memorialist view. And this view of the sacraments essentially says that sacraments are merely symbols that teach us about God, that help us remember things that Jesus taught us. And this is a view that is held by many Protestant evangelical churches. And so they would view something like a baptism as essentially an opportunity for someone to share their testimony of coming to faith, and that the water is merely symbolic. It is just there to teach us about grace and about being washed clean from sin and about becoming a member of the household of God. But it's merely a symbol. On the other end of the continuum, we would have the Catholic view, which is also referred to as sacerdotalism or sacerdotalism.

This is the belief that sacraments have an objective power to convey the grace and blessings they signify. And they always operate. Sacraments work automatically every time. So the whole idea of holy water emerges from this. The idea that once a priest blesses the water, it has an inherent property, an inherent divine property, and it has the ability to convey blessings. So this is a view that against which the Protestant reformers actually fought during the Protestant Reformation. And what emerged is what we find in the kind of broadly Reformed and in the Anglican tradition, a belief in the real presence of Christ and a real participation in the spiritual realities therein through the physical means of the sacraments. So this view emerged that sacraments are outward invisible signs of inward and spiritual grace. I say emerged, but more accurately, it was a recovering of what we inherited from the great tradition, what we see going all the way back to people like St. Augustine. And this belief holds that sacraments are effectual signs when they are administered and received properly. More specifically, when they are received by faith.

That when they are administered and received properly by faith, they provide a means through which God works in our lives. They provide a means through which we experience communion and fellowship with God, in which we participate in the life of God. And therefore, we believe that the sacraments are instrumental in nourishing and strengthening the faith of believers. So this is a belief, for instance, when we talk about the Eucharist, in the real presence of Christ. We don't believe that the elements are transformed. We believe that they remain bread and wine, but we believe in the presence of Christ in those elements. We'll talk a little bit more about that when we have our session on the Eucharist.

[10 : 53] Our catechism instructs us how we should receive the sacraments. It says this, I should receive the sacraments by faith in Christ, with repentance and thanksgiving. Faith in Christ is necessary to receive the grace of the sacraments. And obedience to Christ is necessary for the benefits of the sacraments to bear fruit in my life. So that's a little bit about how we think about the sacraments. Now, specifically, let's talk a bit about baptism. Why do we practice baptism?

Well, the shortest answer I know is that Jesus tells us to. Jesus instructs us, specifically in Matthew chapter 28, verses 18 through 20, that we are to go out and baptize, that we are to make disciples, that we are to teach all that Jesus has commanded us, and that we are to baptize people in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. So we're doing it because Jesus commanded us to do it. But what exactly is baptism? Well, if we look again at the catechism, we see that baptism is an outward invisible sign of a particular inward and spiritual grace. So what is the outward invisible sign? Well, that's water. The sign is water in which candidates are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. What is the inward and spiritual grace? Well, when we look at scripture, when we look at the catechism, we see that that grace is death to sin and new birth to righteousness. So in a sense, when someone is baptized, they go through a kind of death and resurrection.

The old self is put to death, and the new self created in the image of Christ arises. And so the catechism says, the inward and spiritual grace is death to sin and new birth to righteousness through union with Christ in his death and resurrection. I am born a sinner by nature, separated from God. But in baptism, through faith in Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, I am made a member of Christ's body and adopted as God's child and heir. So baptism is a death and resurrection. And through that, we are united with Christ and his death and resurrection. We receive forgiveness of sins and are justified before God. We are adopted into God's covenant family, and we become part of the church, which is the body of Christ, the spiritual community of people who have been baptized and joined to Christ by faith. We are filled and sealed by the Holy Spirit, and we are promised eternal life. And so in all of these ways, we see baptism as being absolutely central to the life of believers. And there is a relationship between the sacraments, between baptism and the Eucharist. You can think of it this way. Baptism is the covenant initiation.

That is what marks our entry into God's covenant community. And then the Eucharist is a kind of covenant renewal ceremony. You're part of the family, so you're welcome to the table. You're welcome to the feast. If you will forgive this analogy, it may be a bit edgy for some of us, but we can also think of baptism as the wedding ring. It's the symbol of our covenant relationship, and the Eucharist as the kind of marital intimacy. The Eucharist is the opportunity that we have, because of baptism, to experience intimacy and connection and fellowship with God. So this is how we think about baptism as a sacrament. Now, this raises another question. Who is eligible to receive baptism?

baptism? The answer would be all who profess saving faith in Jesus Christ and all children of baptized believers. Now, that first part is not controversial. Most people believe that. It is the second thing I said that for some of you will be controversial, that children of baptized believers are also welcome to be baptized and admitted into God's family. Let's talk a little bit more about why we would believe that. We believe that baptism is actually a door into a new family. We look in the Old Testament, and we see the origins of this door. We see God forming the nation of Israel by establishing a covenant with Abraham and all of his descendants. In Genesis chapter 15, verse 6, Abraham believes in God, and it says something very important, that God credits Abraham's faith to him as righteousness.

[15 : 34] Now, this forms the foundation of the gospel. The apostle Paul picks up on this in the New Testament and sees the significance of it, that there is a promise that comes from God that righteousness will now come through faith, not works. There is a way to become righteous that comes through faith, not works. Extremely important. And then God makes a promise to Abraham. He says that this is not only for Abraham, but this is something that he will do for all of Abraham's descendants. And what the apostle Paul realizes is that God's not just talking about Abraham's flesh and blood descendants, he's talking about everyone who is a descendant of Abraham by faith. So everyone who believes and puts their faith in God in God and in God's plan of salvation, God will credit to those people their faith as righteousness.

And then God gives a sign of that promise to Abraham. And he commands Abraham to mark himself with this sign and then to put this mark on all of the males in his household, all of the male children, and then all of the male descendants. And the sign that God gives Abraham is the sign of circumcision.

It's a sign that marks inclusion in this covenant that is defined by this promise that God will credit to us our righteousness, our faith as righteousness. And so Abraham puts this mark on himself and all of the males in his household. And all of his descendants are told to put this mark on their male children soon after they're born. And when non-Israelites come into the community and when they desire to have a covenant relationship with God, they are, the males are circumcised and all of the males in the household, including all of the male children are all circumcised as well. Now, when we look at the New Testament, you say, well, what does that have to do with the church? And what does that have to do with baptism? Well, we see in the New Testament that the church is the fulfillment of the promises originally given to Abraham. This is the great community that God has blessed through whom he intends to bless all of the nations. And this centers on the person of Jesus

Christ, right? Jesus is the means through which God will bless all of the nations of the earth. So the church is the fulfillment of these promises. We see that in Galatians chapter 3, verse 29.

And then in the church, baptism is a newer and better sign. Because whereas circumcision was only given to men, to males and to male children, baptism is a symbol that is given to everyone. To every single person who is a part of God's family, they receive this symbol in themselves. And so this New Covenant is greater in scope, and it doesn't just apply to the Israelites. The New Covenant applies to all people everywhere who come to faith in Jesus. And so the sign is a newer and better version of that.

[18 : 35] Now some of you hear this and you ask, well, how do we know that baptism replaces circumcision? And we see this most clearly in Colossians chapter 2. Paul refers to baptism as a, quote, circumcision made without hands. This is the new version of circumcision. Now some people will object and they will say, well, I never see a child baptized in the New Testament. There are no examples of children being baptized in the New Testament. And that is true. But what we do see in the New Testament, we see multiple household baptisms, where someone comes to faith, and then it says immediately they and their entire household are baptized together. We can only assume, we have to assume, especially in this society, that there were children present who were also baptized at that time. We see this in places like Acts chapter 16, verse 15, Acts chapter 16, verses 33 and 34, 1 Corinthians 1, verse 16. So we see these examples of household baptisms. And in addition to that, when we look at church history, church history simply assumes the practice of infant baptism from the time of the apostles all the way up until it was questioned during the Protestant Reformation.

So for a very long time, it was simply assumed that believers would baptize their children. Now at Advent, our practice is to recognize that we do have people who come from a variety of backgrounds, and some people who come to our church believe in infant baptism. That is called the pedo-baptist position. But there are other people who come who believe that only once you have come to mature, saving faith, only then should you be baptized. And that is the position known as credo-baptism, believer's baptism. And in Advent, our practice is to welcome both, to admit both, to be members of our church if they would like. We believe that this is an area where faithful followers of Jesus can disagree, and we encourage people to treat one another with respect, even as we navigate that disagreement.

But having said that, the Book of Common Prayer does instruct ministers like me to encourage parents not to defer the baptism of their children. And so from time to time, with all due respect, I will encourage you to consider baptizing your babies, because that's what we believe.

Now the last thing we're going to cover in this session is simply to talk a little bit about what actually happens when we baptize someone. And on that day, typically we'll do it on a Sunday during our Sunday service, candidates for baptism are brought forward. They come along with anyone who has sponsored them, helped them in their journey of faith. When children are brought forward, they are brought by their parents as well as any godparents. And they're invited up, and they're asked a series of questions that kind of lay a foundation for following Jesus throughout one's entire life. In the case of infant baptism, parents answer on behalf of their children. And these questions fall roughly into two categories. There are renunciations, things that we turn away from when we come to faith, and we see that in the gospel. In places like Mark chapter 1 or Acts chapter 2, the gospel begins with a call to repent, to turn away from sin, to turn away from idolatry, to turn away from anything that hurts, harms our relationship with God, to turn away from all disobedience. And so this is a kind of series of questions where candidates are asked, do you renounce the devil and all of his works, the vain pomp and false values of the world, and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that you will no longer follow or be led by them. So this is the turning away from everything that would threaten or pull us away from the life of God. And then there are the affirmations. This is the turning toward. What are we turning away from? What are we turning toward? This is essentially based on the idea that believing in the gospel is more than just intellectual assent. It's more than just intellectually agreeing.

Paul speaks, quote, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you. That's in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. So at our baptism, we are asked to affirm the following. Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love? And do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord? So candidates answer those questions, and then they make their baptismal vows using the Apostles' Creed, which we believe has been used for that purpose.