

## Devotion for January 11, 2015: “To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord” (LSB 406)



In Mark’s Gospel for this coming Sunday (Mark 1:4-11), we hear of Jesus’ baptism in the course of just three cursory verses. But thoughtful persons might find themselves left with a series of puzzling questions: Why baptism? How does this happen? What does this mean? What are its implications? What happens if we refuse baptism?

For anyone in this predicament, Martin Luther’s hymn “To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord” is here to help.

As is the case with Luther’s other catechism hymns, this one is not simply based on his Small Catechism explanation. Instead we encounter a stirring sermon on baptism. Employing vivid imagery, the seven stanzas take us deeply into Luther’s understanding of the sacrament upon which our lives as faithful Christians depends.

**Why baptism?** Stanza 1 tells us that these baptismal waters cleanse us of sin and provide the means by which death is drowned, allowing the new person in Christ to be born.

**How does this happen?** In Stanza 2 we sing of how this is accomplished through water endowed with God’s Word and by communion with the Holy Spirit. (The Small Catechism reads, “Through the Word it becomes the water of life.”)

Stanza 3 reminds us that we must remember and heed God’s words, clearly heard at Jesus’ baptism, that we are to trust and follow Jesus alone. Stanza 4 paints an exquisite image of Jesus on the banks of the Jordan, his arms extended wide in the offer of his immeasurable love and grace. We then come to understand that not only the Holy Spirit but all three persons of the Trinity are involved in the sacramental act, and in this way come to dwell within us.

**What does baptism mean?** In his Small Catechism Luther teaches us that baptism with water drowns the old Adam with all his evil lusts and gives birth daily to a new person in Christ. In Stanza 5 Luther eloquently elaborates on the great commission in Matthew 28. Here we sing of how Jesus tells the disciples not just to go and baptize but, as Luther has it, also to redeem all those in a world lost to sin (“Geht hin all Welt zu leren, / Das sie verlor in Sünden ist, / Sich sol zur Busse keren”).

**What if we refuse to be baptized?** In stanza 6 Luther is unsparing: We languish in sin and shame. We are driven to despair, the point at which all hope is lost. No matter how hard we work, everything we do will fail. And no display of piety will save us from endless death. George MacDonald's translation in LW 53 capture this dire proclamation more vividly than Elizabeth Quitmeyer's translation in LSB:

*But in this grace who puts no faith,  
Abides in his trespasses.  
And is condemned to endless death  
Deep down in hell's abysses.  
His holiness avails him not,  
Nor aught which he is doing;  
His in-born sin brings all to nought,  
And maketh sure his ruin;  
Himself he cannot succor.*

**Finally, what are the implications of baptism?** In Stanza 7 Luther shows us how the full breadth of all that Christ does for us is revealed to the eye of faith. In this way we understand how Jesus' blood heals all ills and reveals the fullness of God's love. Quitmeyer ends on a note of forgiveness, but MacDonald in LW 53 is again more faithful to Luther, who concludes the hymn with a stern eye focused on the state of sin which has necessitated our redemption in the first place:

*Faith sees therein a red flood roll,  
With Christ's blood dyed and blended,  
Which hurts of all kinds maketh whole,  
From Adam here descended,  
And by ourselves brought on us.*

In LSB the tune of choice is that which may well be by Luther himself, CHRIST, UNSER HERR. Its rugged terrain is defined by angular leaping fourths and propulsive forward motion. (Therefore it must be played so that the half note is the beat, not the quarter.) Each stanza ends with a short refrain, or *Leise*, that also highly characteristic of Luther.

Indeed, this tune is perfectly suited to the urgency of Luther's message: Only through baptism can we turn from sin and be made alive in Christ. Thanks be to God!

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