

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Seventh Sunday of Easter
Ezekiel 36:23-28
May 24th, 2020

In the Old Testament the very epicenter of communal worship for the people of God was the Temple. Before that it was the tabernacle that moved with them out in the desert after their exodus from Egypt. The tabernacle had three main areas: the courtyard, the holy place and the most holy place. God was “enthroned” in the most holy place where the Ark of the Covenant resided. Only once a year was a person given access to God – this was the High Priest – on the Day of Atonement or, “Yom Kippur.” The children of Israel, the regular folk, had limited access to God. They could enter through the East gate and meet God at the altar for burnt offering, the very center of the courtyard. But they could go no further. The priests that were appointed for God’s daily work in the temple, one priest in particular, could go into the holy place and burn incense at the altar of incense. He could go no further than that. He would then bring out the incense to the altar in the courtyard – the place where the people would gather to meet God. God came out to meet His people there at the altar.

Now, about those priests – they had more access to God than the people. They could go to the altar of incense just right up to the curtain that leads into the most holy place – but they could go no further. The High Priest only could go into the most holy place and that was only one time a year. And before he did that, he had to be cleansed. He had to be washed from head to toe (not just hands and feet) ceremonially in what was called the holy laver. No one could approach God without being clean. In fact, at the priest’s ordination, the priest was already washed and anointed with blood taken from the holy altar of sacrifice mixed with the holy anointing oil. He literally was sprinkled in blood. He had blood on his vestments. So, before he entered into the most holy place, he was sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice and the cleansed from head to toe with the washing of water. He was purified – cleansed – all set to meet God face to face.

In the Old Testament text appointed for this day, God cleanses His people – all the people. He says, *“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you... I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes... you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.”* No doubt, God speaks these words to refer to the cleansing based on the imagery of ritual washings practice in the Old Testament. Washings for the common folk as well as the washings like we see at the time of the Day of Atonement for the High Priest before he enters the most holy place. But this washing we hear in the text is so much more.

The results of this washing are clearly connected to something much bigger and much better for the people. The washing here in the text points forward to the washing fulfilled in Christ Jesus, the coming Messiah, and describes His work through Holy Baptism. You hear about what God will do in the text. He makes clean, He puts a new heart in us. Notice how many times in this cleansing/washing text that Ezekiel the prophet uses the word, “I.” Notice that here in the text God is not saying that He will give you only “a part” of a new heart and you need to create the rest of the new heart... nor is He saying He will put some of His Spirit within you and you have to find the rest of the Spirit and put it into yourself. No! The action belongs to God – to us and for us.

And then, just like God planned it, the Gospel text says the same thing about God’s activity for you: *“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness about me.”* The Spirit of God... the Holy Spirit... is sent in full force to the church. He is given to you so that you may know that God comes to you, He

loves you, He forgives you, and that He is with you always to the very end of the age. We don't have a God that ascended and then leaves some sort of big void for the church – or for you individually. No. We have a God with us now. A God that comes and cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

I remember when I was a kid I would get so dirty playing in the dirt or mud that after I had a bath, I would leave a dirt ring around the inside of the bathtub. My mother would have to wash it off – she cleaned me and then cleaned the bathtub. I made it my mission each day to try to get that dirt ring around the bathtub as thick and dark as possible. I loved to get dirty, but I loved, even more, seeing all the dirt I left behind after being all cleaned up.

Our sins are like that – a dirt that stains and yet is cleansed by a good washing. And because our old sinful self remains, stained with sin, we continue to sin. Thus, we need daily washing. We need a bath, every day – a daily drowning of our sinful selves and then a rising to new life. But let's not attempt to leave the dirtiest ring around the tub we can. In other words, we don't live to sin. We live to live for Christ – to walk in His ways. To honor Him.

Yes, we need a daily cleansing and renewal of God's forgiveness of sins because we remain sinners. So, this, beloved in the Lord, is why our faith, our baptisms are so important. We not only talk about what baptism gave to us when we were baptized years ago. We actually live in our baptisms each and every day as we remember – and live in – who we are... what God did for us and does for us. As baptized Christians we don't think of baptism as something that happened to us but something that "happens" to us. In other words, your baptism is present tense. You live in your baptisms today – a daily drowning and resurrection.

When Martin Luther was a young monk, he was asked to go on pilgrimage to Rome to represent his Augustinian monastery in a dispute. While there, he did all the "Rome" kinds of things there is to do. He visited the relics. He prayed the appropriate prayers at the appropriate holy landmarks. He also spoke the *Our Father* on each of the steps that Jesus took to stand before Pontus Pilate on Good Friday. Yes, these steps were moved from Jerusalem to Rome and served as yet another relic to adorn.

After he did his duty and spoke an *Our Father* on each of the steps... he reached the top. Luther is purported to have said, "I'm not sure if that did my soul any good... but nevertheless, I am baptized." Luther did not say, I was baptized, but that I AM baptized – present tense. And he's right. It happened at a point in time, but we live in – present tense – daily.

This is good news, beloved in the Lord. The reason: we live in our Christian faith daily. Today is what matters to us because this is the day in which we live. Not much good is what happened in the past for us today unless it has an impact on what is going on for our lives right now. Daily, we live in this world filled with all kinds of unknowns which drives us crazy. Daily we live, perhaps in fear over what we might catch. Daily we worry about our loved ones, we fear we might lose our job, we wonder what's next down the road that might set us back. So, daily we need our faith. Daily we need Jesus – we need a bath – we live in repentance of our sins. Daily we are cleansed – and loved – and forgiven. Daily, we have true hope.

So today, you are cleansed by the blood of the lamb, by the washing and renewal in your Holy Baptisms, by the Word of God which says, you are forgiven. Today, you have access to God – directly – through Jesus our Savior. For Old Testament Israel, it wasn't like that. Only the High Priest once a year had direct access to God. But today, through Christ, He has instituted a washing that is for you. And in Christ, you have access to the heavenly Father directly. This is good news – His good news for you. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.