

1 Peter 3:13-22

If you have ever taken the time to count the number of sides on our baptismal font, you know that number is eight. And there is a reason for this. It is not to resemble the octagon shape of a stop sign--although it is beneficial for us if we pause when walking by it to reflect upon what our baptism into Christ truly means. But the number eight ties in with our Epistle text for today. "Eight persons," it says, "were brought safely through water."

At the time of the Flood only eight people out of the vast number of people living on the earth found shelter and safety within the ark. Noah and his wife, their three sons and their wives...no one else, just those eight. And so today our baptismal font has eight sides to point us toward this truth--in your baptism, you, just like Noah and his family, are being rescued from the flood of destruction which is coming upon the entire earth. Not a tornado here and there, as bad as they are; not an earthquake, a hurricane, or a massive flood. As Noah's world faced the judgment of God and was destroyed, so our present world will be destroyed--not when idiot false prophets like the Camping fellow out on the West Coast say it will, but on a day that no one knows, when Christ will return to "judge the living and the dead."

The people in Joplin might be thinking that Camping was off by one day. Not on Saturday did Judgment Day come, but on Sunday when the deadliest tornado anyone living has ever seen struck their city without mercy. Yet when the Last Judgment does come, there will be no reporters around to cover it, no ambulances rushing here and there, no rescue efforts whatsoever. Now we can and should help those in need, but on the Last Day those who are perishing will be beyond help; nothing anymore can be done for them.

But those who are in Christ will be safe. Our text says, "Baptism...now saves you." These words are pretty clear, but many people, including a number of our Reformed friends, object to them. "How can baptism save anyone?" they ask. In Noah's day there would have been many objections as well. "How is that big boat going to save you? And from what?" But Noah paid no attention. He listened to God's Word, he believed it, and he acted on it. This ark was going to save him...he and his family. And you know the story--it most certainly did.

In the same exact way, writes St. Peter, "Baptism now saves you." But we, too, may have some objections, or at least some questions. "Does this mean that once I'm baptized I'm saved, no matter what I do or how I live from then on?" "What about Christ? I thought Jesus saves me?" "What about going to church, hearing the Word and taking the Lord's Supper? Is baptism better than all these?"

We could ask as well, Did the ark save Noah and his family, or did hearing and believing God's Word save them? Or was it the fact that they acted on God's Word by building the ark that saved them? Yes...all of this. It's all tied together. God saved them through everything connected with the ark.

Baptism saves you not because it's some kind of magic, but because baptism is Christ, just as the Word coming into your ears is Christ, just as the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper is Christ. Baptism does not save you apart from Jesus, and His Word, and His Church. Baptism does not stand alone; it does not stand apart from God's Word and His Church--it stands on Christ, just as His true Church stand on Christ, as does the Word of God, and Holy Communion, and Absolution.

How foolish for Noah had he built the ark, but then refused to climb on board. Yet how many are there today who do this very thing! They are baptized, but then refuse to hear and receive Christ Jesus in Word and Sacrament. The ark saved Noah and his family not because the building of it was a good deed which pleased God, but because the ark carried them through all the destruction and landed them safely on the other side.

Baptism saves you because it places you into Christ, into His Church where He feeds and sustains you with His Word and Sacrament, where His forgiveness is constantly given to you, and where He carries you through the storms of judgment and lands you safely in heaven. Anyone who has the attitude, therefore, "I don't need to go to church because I'm baptized," is rejecting not only the church, but also Jesus' Word and Sacraments, is rejecting their baptism, is rejecting Jesus. It would be like one of Noah's sons falling asleep on the deck of the ark and getting swept off into the floodwaters.

When God told Noah to build the ark, Noah listened to God, he believed God, and he acted on what he heard. Had he listened but not believed, he would not have acted. Had he refused to listen, he would not have believed nor acted. There are Christians today who are not acting on God's Word, and it's either because they are not listening, or because they are not believing what they hear.

And we are guilty of this also. We may be in the habit of hearing God's Word, but if we are slow to act on it, it's because unbelief is acting upon us. What else can be said of someone who listens to the Word of God, but then acts in a stingy manner with their offering? They are not truly believing God's promise to provide for all their needs. What else can be said of someone who listens to the Word of God, but then holds a grudge against their neighbor? They are refusing to believe the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ. What else can be said of someone who listens to the Word of God, but then Monday through Saturday lives like their un-churched neighbor? They are not believing the words Jesus speaks to them.

Was Noah a perfect believer? No. No Christian is. We all fall short. Unbelief lives in all of us. Yet God saved Noah and his family. God acted on their behalf. He acted to rescue them. And this is how God acts toward you. God does not wait for us to come around and believe perfectly. He sent His Son to die for us "while we were yet sinners." "Christ died for the ungodly," for the wicked, the Just for the unjust.

In your baptism God acted to place you safely into Jesus. He acted to declare your sins forgiven, to cover you with the innocence of your Savior, to wash you in His blood. And even though we, being baptized into Christ, often live, not for Jesus, but for ourselves; often walk in ways that are not pleasing to God, God today still acts in mercy toward you. He places Christ into your ears and mouth, as He is doing again today, so that Jesus lives within you to fight off your sinful flesh, to fight against the temptations all around you. God acts for you by keeping you in the ark of your baptism, by carrying you through this evil world to land you safely in heaven.

Yes, many will jump ship. Many will resist the mercy of God in Christ. But you, as you hear God's words today, as you receive His flesh and blood at His altar--you can have full assurance that your God will never reject you, that He will never tell you to leave His ark. God, your God, forgives you in Christ for all your disobedience toward Him, for all your sins against other people. And through this very forgiveness, through this mercy in Jesus He is carrying you safely to the other side.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. Decoration Day it used to be called. The graves of those who died in the War Between the States were decorated. Why? So that people would remember, so that they would never forget those who died and why they died. For this reason we are to remember our baptism, we are to remember Jesus as we partake of His flesh and blood, we are to remember His Passion and His resurrection. And we remember by receiving...receiving Jesus today and every time we worship.

When Noah and his family left the ark they built an altar to offer sacrifices to thank God. And God placed a rainbow in the sky for them. Remember, He told them, what I did for you. Friends, what God did for you is just as great. What He is doing for you is to carry you in Christ--He who died for you--to the other side. And one day your ark will land. And then you will know just how thankful Noah was. And you will see the rainbow of beauty--the beauty of heaven. And you will have peace and joy forever with all your loved ones who died in the Faith. Until then, until your ark lands...stay in it. Stay in the ark of your baptism. Stay in the ark of Jesus' church where His Word and Sacraments nourish you. Let your life always be a life of remembrance. Remember Christ Jesus day after day, and week after week, by receiving Him who loves you and forgives you. Amen.