

MIDWEEK LENTEN SERIES

Baptized Into His Death

Is it time to rethink midweek Lenten services? Midweek Lenten services are a cherished tradition in most of our WELS churches. That time of quiet contemplation helps us prepare our hearts for both the rigors and ultimate jubilation of Holy Week.

Typically, those midweek services are used to meditate on the passion of Christ. What else would we talk about at that time? Well... there might be more flexibility built into midweek Lent than we think, flexibility that is entirely Lutheran not just in theory, but in practice.

One possible use of your midweek Lenten series is to review the parts of the Catechism. This is actually a Lutheran tradition. In Luther's day, a number of times during the year, congregations would have special services in the late afternoon or early evening to teach the catechism. Lent was one of those times. Luther himself did this. For example, in 1529 he did a series on the Lord's Supper and confession of sin. Thus, by teaching the catechism during Lent, we are continuing a tradition that stretches back over 450 years. (You can find some of these Lenten catechetical sermons in *Luther's Works*.)

There are two reasons to consider this.

The first reason to use midweek Lent as a catechetical review is that it allows you to preach about extremely important theological issues that do not come up as often in the pericope.

Think about it. Any Lutheran preacher worth his salt references baptism frequently in his sermons. But how many pericopic texts are *about* baptism? You will frequently tell your people how blessed one is who comes to the Lord's Table with a believing heart. But other than Maundy Thursday, how often do you get to explain: the difference between the vertical and horizontal relationships in the Lord's Supper, what it really means to be "worthy," what it really means to "examine" yourself, etc. You undoubtedly reference the Commandments in sermons. You have maybe even preached a series on them. But why displace lessons in the Sundays after Pentecost – Gospel readings that in many cases have been set for centuries – when you have "empty" pericopic slots in the midweek services of Lent?

This is not to say that we would *not* talk about the passion of Christ during midweek Lent. When *don't* we talk about the passive obedience of our Savior! His death and resurrection are at the center of our faith and every other doctrine comes back to them. So draw the connection! For example, in this midweek series, we are suggesting the theme *Baptized Into His Death*. St. Paul writes, "*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*" (Romans 6:3). Baptism connects us to the passion. It places us with Christ's wounds. It buries our sin with his lifeless body. So draw that connection. Include the passion readings in your midweek services. It is Lent, after all! But then preach about the miraculous washing that is *only* miraculous because of the promise of the passion.

The genius of the Lutheran catechism is that it breaks major spiritual concepts up into questions. This makes it eminently adaptable to sermon series.

The second reason to use midweek Lent as a catechetical review is that it allows the major themes of Lent to stand on their own, rather than being forced to fit in a series (or tossed altogether).

Many Lenten series are designed to begin on Ash Wednesday. They then stretch through to Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and sometimes even Easter Sunday! Why? Ash Wednesday has a unique theme to it that can be easily lost when we try and cram it within a series. It is the same with the Triduum.

Preaching the catechism in midweek Lent allows you to have a short series. That, in itself, is wise. There have been Lenten series that combine *everything* in Lent and Holy Week – Sundays in Lent, midweek Lent, Holy week, all 15 or 16 services – under one theme. That's *way* too much. Plus, it fails to recognize that for illegitimate or legitimate reasons, not all members make it to midweek Lenten services.

So why not let the themes of Lent all stand? Let Ash Wednesday be Ash Wednesday. Let Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and the Vigil be what they have always been in the history of the Christian church – the Triduum. Let the Sundays of Lent retain the pericopic lessons. Then let the five midweek services – from Ash Wednesday to Holy Week – be a rich review of Lutheran theology, a teaching we vowed before God to remain faithful to in our confirmation.

Another disadvantage of cramming Ash Wednesday, midweek Lenten services, Holy Week (and sometimes the Sundays of Lent too) into one series is that it is not prospect friendly when it comes to Easter. WELS congregations will undoubtedly want to take advantage of the opportunity Easter presents to invite the community to join our congregations to hear of the Good News of our resurrected Lord. In America at least, Easter is one of those days when even unbelievers will go to church (if someone invites them). Does it make sense to invite someone to the *final* day of a long series? *"Today we are going to conclude a six-week conversation that you have not been part of!"*

In this module of E14, we want to model how to use midweek Lent as a catechetical review. We have tried to retain the "feel" of Lent – solemn awe and wonder at this time of repentance and renewal. We have tried to retain the "push" of Lent – Christ for us, under the Law and under God's wrath. If you like it, you can adapt this concept year after year, as a way of not only observing Lent, but a way of helping your people to live their confirmation.

Blessings!

The challenge of Lenten catechetical series is no different than the challenge every Sunday.

Some people might balk, “*Five weeks on baptism! Won’t that get boring?*” Yes. If you say the same thing week after week.

But that is no different than your regular Sunday preaching. If you have a cookie-cutter approach to sermons – Say something about sin. Say something about Jesus. Say Amen... If you preach Law and Gospel using the same phrases over and over, rather than the Law and Gospel terminology that is unique to that text... you will make even Law and Gospel boring. You will not rob the Gospel of its power to save. How can man limit God! You *will* make it less likely that the people listen, however. And *that* will not be without effect.

Thus, to preach the catechism, you need to commit yourself to the same struggle you commit yourself to as a faithful preacher each week. That struggle is to avoid saying too much! Say only what you need to say *on that day*. You have four other days to say everything else.

We are not providing text studies for these sermons. We are providing possible passages upon which the sermon could be based, and themes that you could focus on in that sermon. It is important, therefore, to familiarize yourself with the “arc” of the five weeks. This is *doubly* true if you have multiple people preaching during those five weeks.

May the Lord richly bless your preparation. And may he give you a double portion of his Spirit as you stand before his people as his herald!

Week 1

BAPTIZED INTO HIS DEATH

Baptism: A Sacrament, Not a Sign

Possible themes/ideas:

- Baptism is what God does for us, not what we do for him. This is true when an adult chooses to be baptized. He wants what God does for him in baptism. This is true when parents bring a child to be baptized. They are doing so because they know there are things they cannot do for their child... cannot give their child.
- “In the name of...” - What does that all mean?
- To think of Baptism as a sign changes it into an act of work righteousness. If “baptism saves you” as Scripture says, and Baptism is something *you* do, than salvation is dependent upon you.
- Baptism doesn’t represent forgiveness. It gives it.
- Baptism is rebirth. What role did we play in our physical birth? None. We were born physically entirely by the will and actions of others. It is no different with our spiritual birth.
- There *is* a sign in baptism – water. God uses water in baptism so that we have a constant sign of his love. Every time we wash our hands, we can remember that our very soul has been cleansed by God. Every time we see the ocean, we know our sins are buried at the bottom of something much deeper. Water is indeed a sign, a constant reminder of God’s love. But baptism – water and the Word – that is *much* more than a sign, *more* than a reminder. It is a Sacrament. It is “touchable” Gospel.

Sermon:

1 Peter 3:20-21 – This water [of the flood] symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

This passage makes it clear. Baptism is NOT a symbol. “Baptism... saves you.” It is a sacrament. Water, however, all by itself, is a symbol. That is what God does in a Sacrament! He connects his Gospel with things we will see constantly – water, wine, bread – so that earthly blessings might remind us of eternal ones.

Possible cross-references:

- Romans 6:3 - Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
- Galatians 3:26,27 - So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Week 2

BAPTIZED INTO HIS DEATH

Baptism: Great Power and Greater Gift

Possible themes/ideas:

- The power of baptism lies not in the water. It is not holy water, not magic or mystical. It's tap water. But, it is water *combined with the Word*. And the Word of God is capable of doing anything that God wills. Is that not what we see throughout Scripture. "Let there be light," and there is. "Lazarus, come out," and he does. In baptism, God unleashes his power to give the gift of faith.
- God can give the gift of faith to anyone. Dead is dead. Thus, it is just as "difficult" to create faith in the heart of a child as it is to create faith in the heart of an adult. If anything, the adult may be the bigger challenge! The adult's mature intellect will want to understand that which is beyond comprehension - how water and word can do such great things.
- Faith affects the intellect, but it is not entirely intellectual. When God speaks through his Word in baptism to the child, we do not worry about whether or not it creates an intellectual grasping of the message. We simply take God's Word as true when it says that baptism creates faith.

Sermon:

Titus 3:4-6 **But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 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, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.**

This stresses that salvation is indeed a gift, and "not because of righteous things we had done." It also makes it clear that the power of baptism is not water, but the Holy Spirit's power unleashed in the Word.

Cross-references:

- John 3:5 - Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.
- Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." *(The Holy Spirit gives many gifts. We talk about "spiritual gifts" all the time. But the gift of the Spirit, i.e. the best thing he can give you, is faith - faith that grasps the merits of Christ.)*
- Ephesians 5:25,26 - Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.
- Mark 16:16 - Jesus said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

Week 3

BAPTIZED INTO HIS DEATH *Baptism Is Needed By All*

Possible themes/ideas:

- A simple ministerial use of reason: All commit sin. Baptism washes sin away. There is no command that limits baptism. Thus, baptism is needed and intended for all.
- The doctrine of original sin is vital to a correct understanding of the world. We can easily witness it. What parent teaches a child to lie or fight or disobey? Parents don't do it. Children just know.
- Children not only are capable of sin, they are also capable of faith, as Jesus himself testifies.
- Any explanation of why *not* to baptize infants has no scriptural basis. This is true of the age of accountability as well.
- Scripture refers to baptism as a superior replacement for circumcision – a cutting of the sinful nature, not just some flesh. While we are cautious not to extend this metaphor too far, this would seem to speak to the use of baptism among the young.
- Why no examples of children being baptized? There are! “He has his whole household.” We find phrases like that in Acts. It is logical that there would not be stories surrounding infant baptism. Baptism is newly instituted. When we try and do evangelism, we reach the parents first, do we not? We don't militantly baptize infants. We reach the parents and then, when the Holy Spirit brings them to faith through our witness, the entire family might be baptized together. This is the pattern of the early New Testament church.

Sermon:

John 3:5-8 - Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Jesus teaches Nicodemus that the imperfect cannot create the perfect, nor the unholy create the holy. Sarx only can produce sarx. But the Spirit can give spiritual life. And he gives it in ways we really can't see.

Cross-references:

- Psalm 51:5 - Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
- Matthew 18:6 - Jesus said, “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”
- Acts 2:38,39 - Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.”
- Acts 16:33 - Then immediately he and all his household were baptized.

Week 4

BAPTIZED INTO HIS DEATH

Baptism: The Right Tool For This Job

Possible themes/ideas:

- The Great Commission sets before Christians our *raison d'être*, the reason for us to exist. We are to disciple the world. We do not have the ability to do that. It would be like giving a piece of granite to a sculpture and saying, "Sculpt!" With what? His fingers? He needs tools! Likewise, to connect people close to Christ takes tools. And God has given us the most powerful of them all – the Gospel. The Great Commission tells us to unleash the Gospel through baptism and ongoing teaching.
- Baptism is not magic. The faith created in baptism *requires* ongoing instruction in the word, or that faith will be lost. Not "might be lost." Not "could be lost." It *will* be if teaching does not follow baptism. Thus, anyone who accuses Lutherans of viewing baptism as superstitious, a "good luck" ritual that puts one into heaven no matter what, does not understand Scripture or Lutheranism.
- Jesus gave us our target when he said "all nations." This builds upon last week, when we saw that children are to be baptized. It also is an encouragement to look beyond ourselves: ethnographically, socioeconomically, and culturally. Baptism tears down every possible wall man builds between himself and others.
- Who can baptize and who should baptize? The Great Commission makes it clear that anyone can baptize. We typically have the pastor do it as a matter of order. But in emergency, this is a power that any Christian may wield.
- The role of sponsors/godparents. The role of the church (as seen in the order of service for baptism in *Christian Worship*.) It's more than a nice honor. It's a way many members of the church play a role in the baptism.
- Jesus' promise is to be with us in our ministerial efforts. For we are only acting on his authority.

Sermon:

Matthew 28:18-20 - Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Our mission and the means are both given to us here. And it is not given as command... as burden. It's given as privilege! When we baptize, we not only bring the baptized to God. We ourselves draw closer to him and the abiding presence he has promised.

Cross-references:

- Acts 8:26-39 – The account of the Ethiopian eunuch. We see *both* baptism and teaching here.

Week 5

BAPTIZED INTO HIS DEATH

Reliving Your Baptism Every Day

Possible themes/ideas:

- Repentance (a big concept in Lent!) is simply the drowning of the Old Adam all over again.
- Baptism did not just impart forgiveness. It is when the Holy Spirit began to dwell in you, turning your body into his temple. The power of the Spirit resides in you.
- Baptism is a pledge of a clean conscience before God, but that assumes that a conscience that is active and alive and well. A conscience that would turn baptism into a license to sin is a conscience that is dead. Nothing that is dead can be clean!
- We were not just saved *from* things: sin, death, Satan, hell. We were saved *for* things. Baptism not only saves us from that which is bad, it enables us to do the things for which we were created.
- There is an argument from the greater to the lesser in Scripture. If God can reanimate a corpse, as he has proven on Easter, why would we think he *couldn't* help us to change our lives? Why would we ever think a temptation was too great to resist? On our own, yes! But what is more difficult, to make the dead rise, or to help someone to control their tongue... or to avoid the abuse of alcohol... or to be responsible on the Internet? If Jesus was raised through the glory of the Father, then clear, we too may live a new life by the power God unleashed within us in our baptism.

Sermon:

Romans 6:2-4,12-13 - We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.

Here you see that argument from the greater to the lesser. It is God acting in us with his power. That is why Paul can say, "Do not offer any part of yourself to sin." Impossible! Except... for the power we received in baptism.

Cross-references:

- Psalm 38:18 - I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin.
- Ephesians 4:22-24 - You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.
- Colossians 2:6-7 - So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ^{rooted} and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.