

**God's Amazing Baptismal Grace**  
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**Augustana Lutheran Church**  
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**The Baptism of Our Lord Day**

Why was Jesus baptized? He was without sin, and John the Baptist was calling people to repent and submit to a baptism of repentance. Why would Jesus be baptized by John? He did so not because he needed to repent, but because – in his identification with us – he stands with us who are in need of repentance. As Martin Luther wrote in the Small Catechism Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. In his humanity, he perceived the need for all humans to repent of sin, so he on our behalf was baptized by John. He accepted responsibility for us.

We must not, however, confuse the baptism of John the Baptizer which Jesus experienced with Christian baptism. What we know as Christian baptism began at the time of the Ascension when Jesus commissioned his disciples to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28:19). That mission statement commenced the practice of Christian baptism. Christian baptism is not a baptism of repentance but of grace. It is a gift of love, a promise of forgiveness that comes to us from the heart of the Lord God Almighty, not because we merit such a gift but because we need that gift.

Please look at the graphic on the announcement sheet that begins “Means of Grace.” The Lutheran perspective on the Christian faith rests on the grace of God – God’s unearned, unmerited, and undeserved love. Pure grace, pure gift. That grace comes pouring down upon us in Word and Sacrament, and you see in the graphic that the first of the sacraments is Holy Baptism. You probably already have this understanding planted in your head and heart; but just to make sure, it is in print before you today. Always remember. Whenever Martin Luther was in doubt about his faith, he would remind himself, “I am baptized.” God’s grace is what gives us our status as children of God, not our decisions, commitments, or actions. Our decisions, devotions, and deeds are important, but are not the means of obtaining God’s grace. His grace is an amazing gift.

When a baby is born, the parents of the baby know to whom the baby belongs. The baby does not know he or she belongs. By being loved, nurtured, accepted, and cherished, the baby learns what parental love is. The experience of being loved teaches the little one about a loving relationship with his or her parents.

So we do not know God in Christ just by being born. When the love of God in Christ Jesus is delivered to us from our parents, pastors, Sunday School teachers, other believers, the Church, we learn that before we ever knew there was a God, that very God loved us. As the author of 1<sup>st</sup> John wrote so clearly, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). That seal of love was attached to those listed in the today’s bulletin when the Sacrament of Holy Baptism was administered to them last year. That love for each of

them came before and always comes before their love for God. It all begins with God's amazing grace, God's initiative in coming to us in Christ Jesus.

Ruel Howe a theologian of the last century wrote that "more is begun in baptism than completed." Baptism is just the beginning of God's grace and of a faithful, obedient life. Baptism is the start of God's relationship with us which is then available to guide us throughout our lives.

So what are the baptized to do? Earlier I quoted from The Great Commission in Matthew 28 which continues "...and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you to the close of the age" (Matthew 28:20). We do not have to search for God's plan for our lives. It is plainly given in Scripture. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies. That's all. That's God's will for the baptized.

Lots of talk is in the air among some Christians today about God's plan for their lives. What is God's plan for your life? What does God want you to do? A man from San Antonio, Texas, rammed his truck into a woman's vehicle on a highway telling authorities he crashed into her while going more than 100 miles per hour because God told him "she needed to be taken off the road." It's unbelievable that both drivers suffered only minor injuries. A sheriff's spokesman said, "The man said God said she wasn't driving right, and she needed to be taken off the road."

What has God told you to do? How are you to live out your baptismal gift? To what actions does God's promise lead you? Hopefully not by running people off the road. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10? Remember, the setting is someone asking Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). At the end, Jesus asks "Who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? (Luke 10:36). The initial questioner then says, "The one whom showed him mercy" (Luke 10:37). That's what God wants us to do – always. That's God's plan for you, me, and all believers.

That's not intuitive knowledge or natural instinct. You and I have to learn that showing mercy and doing biblical justice is God's will. Such an attitude of gratitude to God and compassion for others grows out of knowing that God in Christ first loved us; hence, we are to love one another – all others. Our natural instincts tell us that if we want to be rewarded, we'd best perform. The season just past always presents us with the message about Santa Claus:

He know if you've been sleeping, he knows if you're awake  
He knows is you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake.

The message is be good and you'll get presents. Be bad and you'll get a lump of coal in your stocking on Christmas morning. Then we're tempted to project that same dynamic on God. God loves us if we're good. This process that seems so natural, is so foreign to the Lord God revealed in Christ Jesus. God loves us first, not after. Before we believe or help others, God loves us. Before we think about the Lord God, Jesus loves us.

At each baptism, a baptismal candle is presented to the newly baptized with the admonition, “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). It is not our light that is to be seen, but the Light of Christ shining through us that is to be seen. The promise of Christ’s living and loving presence is given in baptism so that we might grow to be his disciples (students and followers) daily. Because Christ is with us, we want to love and serve him.

Sometimes the value of religion is reduced to “being a better person.” Nothing wrong with that, but Christ Jesus has in mind a very different understanding. He calls us to be his faithful disciples, his devoted followers who grow every day into deeper understanding of what it means to be a disciple. In his obedience to the Father, Jesus went so far as to die on the cross. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in Cost of Discipleship, “When Jesus Christ calls a person to follow him, he bids that person to come and die” (p. 99). Such discipleship “demands my soul, my life, my all” (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, #803).

All begins in God’s grace – a grace so profound, beautiful, and pervasive that we cannot help but be overwhelmed, humbled, and grateful. Baptism illustrates the amazing grace of God. Amen.