

# The Gift of Holy Baptism

*Our Use of God's Grace*



*by the Reverend Andrew D. Zoerb, STS  
for the faithful at Our Savior's Lutheran Church  
Denmark, Wisconsin*

*Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way  
that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins  
or conscience oppress us, and say: "But I am baptized!  
And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved  
and have eternal life, both in soul and body."*

*This is the reason why these two things are done in baptism;  
the body has water poured over it, because all it can receive is the water,  
and in addition the Word is spoken so that the soul may receive it.*

*- Martin Luther, 16th Century Church Reformer*

## WHY DO WE BAPTIZE?

There may be many answers to this question, but the most common is that baptism gives us a sure ticket into heaven—we think of baptism as an insurance plan. “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). Verses like this one from the Bible can make us fearful, and we begin to search for ingredients to our recipe of salvation.

But the waters of baptism don’t flow from a fire hose of salvation spraying magical water, so that whoever gets hit will be with God in heaven when they die. The early church celebrated baptism as an entrance rite into the Christian community. Participating in this rite meant that the baptized were deliberately giving up one way of life for another. Those who made this commitment to the Christian way of life would spend the period before Easter—known as Lent—in preparation for their baptism. These baptismal candidates would go through a series of questions and renouncements before finally being baptized on the eve of Easter, known as the Vigil of Easter.

The commitment they were making wasn’t just part of a formula; rather, their commitment was to Christ, and to a particular way of servanthood in God’s kingdom.

This is now the same baptismal commitment we must consider. In a time when secular norms and individuality try to dictate how we do what we do—even and especially in the way of church practices—the church has lost some understanding about Holy Baptism. But because this is a holy gift, we must understand that baptism is first and fundamentally a radical gift given to us—and for us—by our God who would claim us as His children.

## BAPTISMAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHOICES

As we come to the font, we’re asked to respond to a series of questions, and affirm our acceptance of some very specific expectations and responsibilities.

Sponsors will be the first to present us. Sponsors—more traditionally known as Godparents—are partners in our faith. They should be people who possess a strong commitment to faith, and the ability to guide us in the ways of the Christian life. Often we choose relatives or close friends to be sponsors because we know them and like them. That’s fine as long as those whom we’ve chosen to be sponsors are fully aware of that to which they are committing, and intend to do their best to fulfill that commitment. So when we choose, we need to do so intentionally and with a focus towards Christ.

Then we’re asked: *Called by the Holy Spirit, trusting in the grace and love of God, do you desire to be baptized into Christ?* Our answer is life-changing.

If your child is being baptized, as parents you’re entrusted with responsibilities until the child affirms their baptismal commitment when they’re older in a ritual known as “Confirmation.” Below are the responsibilities parents will commit to—take some time to read through these responsibilities carefully and ponder what they mean for you and your child.

*to live with them among God’s faithful people,  
bring them to the Word of God and the Holy Supper,  
teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed,  
and the Ten Commandments,  
place in their hands the Holy Scriptures,  
and nurture them in faith and prayer,  
so that they may learn to trust God,  
proclaim Christ through word and deed,  
care for others and the world God made,  
and work for justice and peace.*

## BAPTISM WITHIN THE CONGREGATION

There is a great benefit to being baptized in the midst of our congregation. Whether or not you know everyone in our congregation, they will also take a vow during your baptism. They will promise to support and pray for you in your new life in Christ.

What does this mean for you? It means that our congregation will offer opportunities for you or your child to grow in faith. We'll offer you a chance to learn more about who God is, to articulate a tradition and a faith that has affected the lives of people for thousands of years, and to experience the faith life of others, celebrating with them in moments of great joy, and suffering alongside them in moments of deep grief. You'll see how being Christian isn't just something we call ourselves—it's something we truly seek to live, not only for the benefit of ourselves, but for the good of others as well.

Sometimes, however, individuals don't feel comfortable being baptized in the midst of a congregation. When that's the case, a baptism may take place outside of the Sunday worship service. This is discouraged, and should only be done in situations of urgency or special need. If it's necessary that the baptism take place outside of Sunday worship, a time should be found soon after for the vow to be renewed as the individual joins in worship and participates in the life of the congregation.

Regardless of whether Holy Baptism is done publicly or privately, God blesses the individual with a great gift of grace. When done publicly, there is an added layer of encouragement and accountability to aid us in our Christian life together. This is a moment of great joy for our congregation as we welcome among us individuals and children who "join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming Word to all the world" (from Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 231).

## WHAT'S CHANGING AT OUR SAVIOR'S?

Each year we have individuals and families request Holy Baptism for themselves or their children. Thanks be to God for this! But we began to see a trend: as a community of Christians, we were not staying connected with these newest disciples.

There are a variety of reasons for this—some good, and some not. In the end, we have not done as well as we'd like in our commitment to these newly baptized. And so we're doubling down on the impact Holy Baptism has in the life of the Christian, and in our congregation.

**Holy Baptism is done when an individual desires to be baptized, but it is a communal practice within the life of the congregation.** Our current culture of individual choice over-and-above a sense of community and tradition has warped this understanding to mean that an individual decides when and how Holy Baptism is to occur within the congregation. This can work in the life of the individual, but not necessarily in the life of the congregation. It is an individual's desire which brings them to the font, or river, or lake, but it is the congregation which witnesses the new believer's commitment to Christ in an effort to support them in their life together. As a congregation, we will continue to embrace the common bond Holy Baptism offers.

To better embrace this bond and encourage its growth, Our Savior's will publicly celebrate Holy Baptism on four appointed Sundays throughout the year. These Sundays will be accompanied by a brief "Welcome to Holy Baptism" class intended for families and individuals, as well as their sponsors. During this class, those desiring to be baptized will hear from others who have been baptized and living a faithful life, and who have been raising children in the shadow of the cross through Holy Baptism.

Families and individuals who do not wish to participate in a public baptismal rite will still receive the gift of Holy Baptism through Our Savior's. These individuals will need to attend a "Welcome to Holy Baptism" session prior to receiving this gift. There are four sessions scheduled throughout the year to accompany the public baptisms, so anyone desiring to be baptized will not have to wait long.

This is a new pattern for our congregational life together. The pattern will have lasting effects on the way we understand Holy Baptism as groups of new Christians come forward to be baptized in the font that has been used to wash so many in God's grace. We pray for God's guidance as we continue to minister to those who have been reborn in the waters of Holy Baptism. We pray for the joy of Christ to burn in the hearts of new believers, and for that joy to be rekindled in the hearts of those who have spent their lifetime in service to Christ. And finally, we pray that Christ, who is our everything, would guard our hearts and minds, so that everything we do would bring Him glory.



*Pastor Andrew D. Zoerb was ordained at Trinity Lutheran Church in Tipton, IA, on June 25, 2011—a date which commemorates the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession in 1530. He received his Master of Divinity from Wartburg Theological Seminary, and has served Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Denmark, WI, since July 2011. Pastor Andy is a member of the Society of the Holy Trinity (STS), having signed the rule in 2015.*