

Before and After

In the name of the beloved Son of God, dear friends in Christ: A favorite technique of advertisers is to give you “before and after” photographs. The approach is used to hype all kinds of products, everything from bed mattresses to laundry detergents. They’ll give you two pictures or film clips for comparison: “Here’s what you got before (*ugh!*), and here’s what you get when use the item they’re trying to sell you (*wow!*).” The technique is used very effectively by companies that make diet drugs and home exercise equipment. First they show the subjects looking flabby, unkempt, and depressed, and then in the after shots they show the same folks looking buff, sexy, happy, and confident. For some reason it always happens that their hair is neater, their clothes are sharper, and their posture is improved too. It’s amazing what diet pills and exercise can do. And whatever the program is, it’s always nearly effortless and takes almost no time. “Why, in just ten minutes a day for only six short weeks, you can have the whole new you you’ve always wanted.”

It never quite works out that way in reality though, does it? Though your *before shots* look about the same as the ones advertised, your *after shots* rarely show the same remarkable improvements. Contrary to the claims, your whites are not 100% whiter, your sleep isn’t 95% improved, and your friends are not hounding you for the secrets of your new found success. Nor is it ever as easy as they want you to believe. With that exercise equipment, for example, they’ll show some trained athletes smiling and looking like they’re having the time of their lives while using the gizmo they’re pitching; but if you were to succumb to the temptation and get one of these torture devices to use in your own home for the “free thirty-day trial period”, you’d soon discover that after about thirty *seconds* use, you’re soaked in sweat and gasping for breath. Sure, “only ten minutes a day for six weeks and you’ll find the slimmer and trimmer you”; but it turns out that you already have to look like the after shots in order to use it for ten minutes.

And so we’ve learned – sometimes through our mistakes – to be suspicious of the claims made by those who use the “before and after” approach. In some ways that’s good. It’s made us more savvy consumers – less likely to be taken in by the hucksters. But I wonder if it also doesn’t hamstring us a bit when it comes to our Christian faith.

You see, in the Scriptures, our Lord makes use of before and after pictures to show us spiritual truths. And perhaps the best example of this is Holy Baptism. The Lord makes some amazing claims about what it does for us. The before and after shots are like night and day. He says in Baptism we are born again or “regenerated” – that is “remade”. He says we go from being a child of the Devil and under the curse of sin to become a holy child of God with the gift of eternal life in Christ. In today’s Epistle, Paul says that in Baptism you were joined with Christ in his death and burial, and then were raised with him to walk in newness of life. He’s saying that in Baptism there’s a whole new you.

It sounds terrific. But these amazing claims are hard to verify in our own *practical* experience. We put a little water on someone’s head and say the words that Jesus gave us, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, and the person looks exactly the same as before. The person *acts* the same as before. And if you ask an adult who’s just been baptized, he’d probably tell you he *feels* pretty much the same as before. We don’t see the “whole new person” that was promised. So, as a result, many people (even many *Christians*, sad to say) conclude that nothing happened. Baptism doesn’t work. And the

promises that God gives us about baptism ... well ...either they're just figurative, they really aren't about Baptism, or they're lies. And sometimes even those of us who want to take God at his word about Baptism are skeptical. We look at the results of it in our lives with disappointment. Or we may think of it as something that was useful when we were infants, but now that we've grown up, we don't need it any more – as if it were a childhood toy, or worse, one of those products promising to give you abs of steel that didn't work out, but that you were too embarrassed to send back, so it stays in the back of your mental closet with a pile of other things that are no longer useful or that failed to deliver what they promised.

This is truly unfortunate because the Lord's gift of Baptism is something we can and should use in our lives every day. And when we neglect it or fail to properly appreciate it, we deprive ourselves of its great power, comfort, and assurance. The before and after pictures the Lord gives us about Baptism are very real. What we need to understand though is that these pictures refer to changes that take place on a spiritual level. You shouldn't expect to see them with anything but the eyes of faith – but they are real changes nevertheless. And to help us perceive them, they are illustrated for us in the Gospel lesson for today in a way that can be seen. So let's take a look at the before and after pictures God gives us about Baptism.

The “before” picture is John the Baptist. He is a living portrait of life under the law. He is an illustration of our spiritual condition when we are alienated from God through our sin. To show that, he lives alone in a dry desert wasteland. He's hot, sweaty, dirty, uncomfortable, hungry, and thirsty. His body is gaunt and emaciated from constantly fasting and his meager diet of bugs. His knees are scarred and scabby from hours of praying for mercy on the hot gravel. His dirty cheeks are stained with tears of repentance. And his voice is a constant accusation: “Here's where you went wrong. You shouldn't have done that. You really made a mess of it. God is angry with you for your sin.” He is a picture of our own guilty consciences feeling the heavy hand of the Lord's judgment.

The after picture is the Lord Jesus. Where John comes fasting, praying, and feeling generally miserable over sin, Jesus comes eating, drinking, and basically carefree. He has a clean conscience. He is at peace and secure in his relationship with the heavenly Father, and so he is free to enjoy all the good gifts of God's creation. He will later be accused of being a glutton and a drunkard; but actually, his is the proper attitude of a child of God: rejoicing in the Lord for his many gifts and giving thanks to him for them. And I don't mean to suggest that he's focused on his own pleasure, quite the contrary. He's helpful, friendly, looking for opportunities to share what he has with others less fortunate. He's living the life of love for others.

It is, in fact, his great concern for others that brings him here to the Jordan River where John is baptizing. John points out people's sin and baptizes the repentant with water. That's all he can do. He is powerless to take it any farther than that – except to tell them that One is coming who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit. When John baptizes, people come up out of the water still looking forward for the promise to be fulfilled. Now comes Jesus, who is not a sinner and has no need for repentance. He enters John's Baptism. Why, since he is not a sinner, does he do that? The reason is that he is the fulfillment of the promise of John's Baptism. Jesus enters John's Baptism to complete it or rather to fill it with himself. By descending into the water with sinners, he shows that he will bear our sin. He is baptized *for us* – he combines himself with Baptism – so that our Baptisms will be in him. What that means is that the baptismal “after pictures” he experiences also apply to us.

Which pictures? Well, first the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and remains upon him. You may remember that back in the days of Noah the world was growing

increasingly sinful. The Lord declared at that time, “My Spirit will no longer guide people.” People’s hearts had become hardened. They were resisting the Lord’s leading to such a degree that he withdrew his Spirit from them. He changed the way he worked in the world: he brought judgment on the old world and drowned it out with a flood. Now, he sends the Spirit on Jesus to show that in Baptism the relationship restored. After the water is applied – after the old is ritually drowned – God places his Spirit on the one being baptized. And the Spirit becomes the light and guide of that person. Specifically, the Spirit brings the gift of faith that trusts God’s Word, and illumines the heart and mind to understand and live by it.

Next we see that heaven is opened. The word in the text says that the heavens are literally “*torn open*” or “*ripped apart*”. It’s a rapid, violent sort of thing. It calls to mind how the temple veil was torn in two when Jesus died for our sin on the cross. That veil was a curtain of separation between God and humans. Its tearing showed that with Christ’s sacrifice accepted, there were no more barriers between God and people – that we now have free access to God. And here the heavens are opened to show that in Baptism the way to our heavenly home is no longer closed. The picture shows that Baptism gives us the promise of eternal life.

And then comes the voice from out of heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with *you* I am well pleased.” Before Baptism and the gift of faith the Lord conveys through it, we are under God’s curse. He has nothing good to say about us. But with the Spirit, and faith, and the washing of rebirth, comes Christ’s own sinless perfection that is credited to our account. After Baptism, when the Father looks at you, he sees the obedience of his Son into whom you were baptized. The words of love and approval he speaks are directed to you. They apply to everyone who believes and is baptized. *All* of these “after shots” are ours in Baptism.

But the skeptic in us is still tempted to ask, “How? How can a little water and a few words do all that for a person?” Luther answered that question in his Small Catechism: “*How can water do such great things?*” His reply: “*Certainly not just the water, but the Word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts God’s Word in the water.*” If indeed Baptism were just a human ceremony made up to try to appease an angry God, it would have no power whatsoever. We would be foolish to believe that it had any effect at all. But Baptism carries the command and the promise of God. The Lord himself guarantees the effects of Baptism with his own unfailling Word.

As a matter of fact, it is God who speaks in Baptism. *His* Words are spoken, not ours; so it is his voice that we hear. And this is how we can be so sure about Baptism’s effects. We read in the Psalm a while ago, “*The voice of God is over the water. ... The voice of God is powerful.*” When God speaks, things happen. Back at the time of creation, God spoke and it was. Now in Baptism, a *recreation*, God speaks and it is. We know too that the Word of God is not just over the water in a detached sort of way; it’s actually *in* the water. How do we know that? Because in the morning’s Gospel we saw it happen. Jesus Christ, who *is* the living, incarnate Word of God went into the water *for us*. And today, when the Word is spoken at a Baptism, he reenters the water. Jesus, the Word, is combined with the water so that those who have been baptized have been touched by Christ the Lord; and with his touch we are cleansed, delivered from the power of the devil, and raised to new life

So, unlike all those other things that promise so much with before and after pictures, Baptism really works. And the glory of it—as if all that we’ve been shown already were not enough – is that it’s not just a one-time thing. Whenever and as often as we are looking and feeling like the before picture: like John, dirty with sin and oppressed by guilt, we can return to our Baptism through repentance. When we confess our sins to the Lord, remembering and

trusting in Christ's sacrifice for us, we return to that baptismal moment – and all the “after shots” are brought up to date. Again, God sends his Holy Spirit and gives faith; again he opens heaven to us; and again he speaks his approval: “You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

It is by returning daily to this baptismal moment that empowers you to live the Christian life – like Jesus, at peace and secure in your relationship with your heavenly Father. You are free to enjoy all the good gifts of God's creation, rejoicing in the Lord and giving thanks to him. And you are guided by his Holy Spirit to live the life of Christian love.

So, this morning, it's fitting that together we remember and celebrate the Lord's Baptism for us; but what I want you to recognize is that the significance of his Baptism is what it does for you. Focus on the after shots he experienced, believe that they also apply to you, and you will see that your own Baptism is worth remembering, celebrating, and living in every day. May our merciful God and Father give us the grace to fully utilize this his great gift. In Jesus name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!