SERMON NOTES — January 12, 2025

Main point: to reconsider baptism as much more than a 'ticket to heaven'; rather, as an invitation, or call, to participate in God's age-old project of saving the creation from the consequences of human sin — human sin conceived as our perpetual dividedness, or what we have named in its collective form as "nationalism."

Opening scenario: forty years ago Pastor Paul was asked a question in the oral exam for his ordination that went something like this: You receive a frantic call from the husband of one of your parishioners you know to be expecting the birth of a child. Their baby has just been born with serious medical problems. He asks, "Can you come right away and baptize our newborn?" But while you're on your way to the hospital the baby dies. Upon your arrival, the grief-stricken parents ask you to baptize their now deceased child. Do you perform the baptism?

The answer is that pastoral care trumps everything in the face of such unimaginable grief, so you perform the baptism to help bring comfort. But part of the ongoing pastoral care in the subsequent weeks and months might get around to what baptism means as a way of emphasizing God's grace. We have been talking about revitalizing the basic Gospel message. What does this mean for how we think about baptism?

Common view of baptism that makes things worse for the opening scenario: Baptism is required for salvation in the shrunken sense of going to heaven when we die, avoiding eternal damnation. Baptism is a ticket to heaven. Do you see how this makes things worse for parents who lose a child before he or she is baptized? The fear of eternal damnation lays a heavy layer of grief over an already unimaginable grief. This need not be, if we dwell in the biblical picture of salvation.

The full biblical picture of salvation: God created the world very good (Gen 1-2), creating human beings to join God in bringing it to fulfillment. Human sin gets in the way of God's creative intentions (Gen 3-11). God chooses a people to help get things back on track: Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants are blessed to do so, blessed to be a blessing to all the families of the world (Gen. 12:1-13). The biblical story shows the long journey of the covenant people's ups and downs in meeting this mission of unifying all the families of the world. Humanity seems trapped in its dividedness, which in its collective form can aptly be named "nationalism."

God's Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, becomes the key to getting unstuck. He willingly becomes victim to our nationalism on the cross; in being raised on the third day he becomes the promise that the sin of nationalism is defeated. There is a new way of being human which leads to unity and life, rather than division and death. So it's crucial to understand the following: if the Gospel is about salvation as God's long process of healing human dividedness, then the picture of salvation as God eternally dividing human beings into saved and damned is ***Anti-Gospel***. It is God doing the final dividing rather than healing. God has succumbed to and made ultimate our sin of dividedness.

We see the true Gospel most clearly in the letters of Paul, especially Ephesians: Ephesians 1: Paul says that the "mystery of God's will," "as a plan for the fullness of time," has been "to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:9-10). Ephesians 2: God accomplishes this through the death and resurrection of the Messiah, through whom God "might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace" (Eph 2:15). Ephesians 3: the boots-on-the-ground effect of all this is for Gentiles to be included in the promise of salvation to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. In other words, salvation is a long process of bringing together all human beings. It is a new way of being human that heals all our nationalistic programs of remaining divided, in mortal combat with each other.

Paul also applies this to baptism. In Romans 5:12-21, Paul outlines the new way of being human, from the sin and death of the first way of being human, to the grace and life of the new way in Christ; followed by Romans 6, where baptism is dying and rising with Christ in order to participate in the new way of being human. And we mostly see baptism linked to becoming unified rather than divided in Galatians 3:

> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:27-29)

Ending with Luke's picture of Jesus' baptism: The voice from heaven says, 'You are my son. I'm so pleased with you. You're ready now. Here's my Spirit. Now go to this business, this mission, of opening my salvation to all my children.' And so God says to each of us, "You are my son, my daughter. I'm so pleased with you. You're ready now. Here's my spirit. Go out into this broken world and bring it healing."