

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD – EPIPHANY 1 January 5, 8 & 9, 2005
St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

WE HAVE BEEN CHANGED! Titus 3:3-8

We need to change this. People are continually changing things to improve them and make them better. Have you ever noticed that products that you and I buy are continually being changed, improved and made better for us? Every year automobile makers come out with new models that have new devices to make your driving experience better and safer. Not only do we continue to change and improve products that we produce we are continually being told how we can change ourselves to make us better and improved. We are told what to do to add years to our lives. We are told what to do and take so that we don't fall over dead from a heart attack or stroke. We have now progressed to the stage where we are encouraging people to improve and maintain their youthful looks and appearance. We have tummy tucks, botox injections, hair implants, plastic surgeries, breast implants, and drugs to maintain your youthful sexual potency. Everyone sees that we need to improve and to change. However, all of these changes do not change what is basically wrong with all of us. Paul speaks about the real problem that we all face. It is this inborn disease that causes all the problems that we face in our lives, in the process of aging, in our relations with one another. Yes, it needs to change. The reality is that you and I cannot change it. But the good news is that God has and he does change us.

Today as we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord Jesus, the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we focus on this truth – **WE HAVE BEEN CHANGED!** As we study Paul's words to a fellow pastor, Titus, the apostle clearly states **I) How This Change Happened** and then goes on to elaborate on **II) What Does This Mean For My Daily Life.**

HOW HAS THIS CHANGE HAPPENED?

Most people recognize that there are things that need changing in their lives. It may relate to our physical appearance and activity. Maybe we have problems with food. When we start eating we can't stop. And we balloon in our size, become overweight and then develop health problems – heart problems, diabetes, poor circulation and the list goes on. We may have become couch potatoes and we do no physical exercise and this again translates into more health problems. It may be that we have problems with alcohol. When we start drinking, we can't stop. Others have problems with gambling. They continue to seek to win that elusive jackpot. They spend hundreds and thousands of their dollars throwing them away into slot machines and other games of chance in the hope of one day becoming rich. Still others are continually dissatisfied with the hand that has been dealt them in life and they spend their time comparing themselves to others and wandering, "why can't I be like that person?" "Why can't I have all that person has?" We see these problems and we realize something needs to change. But it seems that no matter what we try to do, we can't change it. That's right! We can't change things. The problem is that you and I inherited a cancer that is killing us. It's called sin. It means that we are unholy and imperfect. Our basic nature is evil. No matter what you and I may think. No matter what others may say about us, each of us is basically evil and corrupt. There is no man-made cure to eliminate this problem. Paul describes our condition in this way, "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another." (v. 3)

The good news is that God has changed us. Listen to what Paul tells Titus, "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things that we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior," (Vv. 4-6)

God rescued us and made us safe. Often when you and I help someone we have reasons for doing so. We may like the person. The person may have done something for us in a time of need and now we feel obligated to help that person in their time of need. What was God's reason for doing this? Paul makes it very clear that it had nothing to do because of us. He writes, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done." (v. 5a) The reason for God rescuing us has nothing to do with us. Just like right now people throughout our nation and world are busy helping the residents of Indonesia and other people in south Asia who have suffered so greatly because of the earthquake and tsunami. In a recent radio report one of the announcers made the observation that Indonesia is one of the militant Islamic countries that have been training terrorists to attack the US and other countries world-wide. Yet now we are helping the people of that country in their distress. Do they deserve to be helped? No. Are we going to help them? Yes. Why? It is the love of God that compels us. We love because he first loved us. This is Christian love in action.

Now why has God saved us? Paul writes, "because of his mercy." (V. 5b) It is God's great love and kindness. He is merciful. As he once said to Moses, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." (Exodus 34:6-7a)

Paul then proceeds to tell us how God accomplished this for each of us personally. Now we might say, "oh yea Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins. That's how God saved us." That's true. But Paul takes it one step further. He tells us how this became ours personally. He writes, "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." (Vv. 5b-6) Remember Jesus once said to a Jewish teacher of the law, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." (John 3:3) Nicodemus asked Jesus how this was possible. He said, "I certainly can't crawl back into my mother's womb and come out a second time." Jesus then explained, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." (John 3:5) Jesus died for all the people of this world even the ones who end up in hell. The question is how does this deliverance and rescue become mine personally? That happens when God changes us. How does God do that? He gives us a bath. Paul calls it the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. What is that? It is the sacrament of holy baptism. In baptism God personally washes our sins away and gives us the gift of faith. That's a miracle. We can't change ourselves, but God can and he does. Can my baptism save me? It certainly does. That's what Peter tells us when he writes, "baptism now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 3:21) Our baptism is a treasure that we often forget. In baptism we received the gift of faith. The fact that you and I trust that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior is not because we decided to do something it is because God did something for us. Faith is a gift and it is given in baptism through the power of God's almighty Word. It is that same Word that made this world from nothing that has given you and me trust and confidence in Jesus

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY DAILY LIFE?

This good news transforms your life and mine. First we have an inheritance and now we love to do good. Most of us know that to get an inheritance someone has to die and have placed your name in their will. That's true. However, the inheritances that we receive from other people never last. If it is cash, it is often spent and used up for things. If it is something, a vehicle, an antique or some other personal property, that doesn't last forever. It can be used up, break or wear out. But we have an inheritance that we will never use up and it can never be destroyed or stolen from us. Who died and put us in his will? Jesus and the inheritance is out of this world. Paul writes, "so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life." (v. 7) We have eternal life. We are going to live forever even though we die physically. We are going to be with the Lord in his heavenly kingdom. That's the inheritance that each of us will receive at our physical death. We already have it, but we do not see or experience all its glory and splendor. For Jesus tells us, "whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." (John 5:24) That inheritance certainly changes our perspective on lots of things. My view of death and dying has changed. I no longer view this as something that is horrible and to be avoided at all cost.

I see this as something that I can face with peace and look forward to because I know where I am going to be and why.

There is another change that takes place in our lives. Paul already mentioned it at the beginning of this portion of his letter. He said, "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another." (v. 3) The way we live has changed. We try not to be disobedient. We strive not be controlled and enslaved by certain passions and lusts. We work not to live in wickedness and jealousy. We work to stop hating others. As he concludes Paul comments, "This is a trustworthy statement. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone." (v. 8) What's the reason for striving to do what is good? Paul makes it very clear. It is because we have been saved by the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Do we get it all straight? No! Is everyone here free from greed, from gossiping, from envy and jealousy, from feeling better than others because they come to church? No we're not. But thank God, he has washed us and made us clean. He doesn't hold these or any other sins against us. That's the message that Paul gave Titus to proclaim to the people of the island of Crete. That's the message that our Lord has given us to proclaim at St. Mark's. We are not here to clean people's lives up. We are here to proclaim that God has saved us through Jesus Christ. It is this message that helps each of us to improve and change. God made a promise to us in our baptisms. He promised us that as long as we keep breathing, he will continue to keep on forgiving us.

God made us new people. He changed us in our baptism. Now we daily work to be what we are.

Amen.