

You know someone is popular when they celebrate their birthday decades after they've already died. This past Friday fans of Elvis Presley celebrated his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. Elvis died in 1977. With more top 40 hits in the United States than anybody by far, Elvis is still more popular than the likes of the most popular music artists of today. Everyone wanted to connect to him during his career. For most they listened to his music. Others scored tickets to see him in person. Today celebrating his birthday is just another way fans connect with the king of rock and roll.

It wasn't but a couple of weeks ago we celebrated Jesus' birthday. I guess we know how popular Jesus is based on the fact that he died over 2000 years ago and we're still celebrating. But when he was born hardly anyone took notice. Even years later when he was announced to the world as someone special his popularity couldn't compare to the popularity of TV or movie stars of today. Jesus was baptized but most just went on their way thinking nothing of the man from Galilee stepping out of the Jordan River.

So does Jesus enjoy the celebrity status of an Elvis Presley or even Carrie Underwood? Judging by his earthly life no, but ever since he left this earth millions want to be connected to him in some way. Jesus is the center point of history, a personality that splits families, causes arguments among friends, and has people all over wanting to know him. We do too. That's why we're here, to know him, to get connected to him. Today in the second lesson this morning we learn why and how. We learn that we can be...

**Connected to Christ in baptism**  
**God's mercy saves us**  
**The washing of rebirth and renewal saves us**

Explain kindness or love. It's hard to do unless you're talking about specific actions that generally are considered kind and loving. God's kindness can be explained as a disposition towards human beings, a generosity, or a mild manner. God's love can be pictured like a philanthropist, someone with a lot of money and a heart to spend it fixing the world's problems. That's where God's love is directed, at human beings. But ultimately when Paul speaks about God's kindness or love he is speaking about an action. He's talking Christmas. There in baby Jesus God's kindness and love appeared in the flesh. It's a specific action by God considered kind and loving.

While it might not be easy to see, Paul is emphasizing the kindness and love of God in comparison to our works. **"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done."** Our first parents ruined God's perfect creation, and ever since sin has been our downfall and has lurked in our lives causing separation from God. We have to admit we've tried solving the problem ourselves. We've trotted out all sorts of works to try and make up for it. We decide to give more to church or make a resolution we'll treat a brother or sister better. We hope taking care of a sick relative, watching the neighborhood kids, or being nice to a new coworker can earn us points with God. But God sets the bar on works at perfection, and every one of ours falls short. Every righteous work we thought we accomplished, every time we thought we earned something, we didn't.

Paul slaps us with a hard realization; salvation can't be achieved by human effort or merit. We're totally helpless without action on God's part. But a Savior God does what a Savior does. **"When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us...because of his mercy."** God couldn't and didn't look away from a world gone bad with sin. He looked with compassion on all humanity. His compassion overflowed to the whole world. His mercy is enough to make an impact on every person who has ever lived or will, including everyone here today. He saved the world by his mercy.

At Jesus' baptism the world got its first glimpse of the Savior, God's mercy in the flesh. Jesus was the demonstration of God's kindness and love. Jesus came to the banks of the Jordan River to satisfy God's holiness and justice regarding sin. All of God's laws needed to be obeyed perfectly. Jesus needed to identify with sinful humans. Jesus needed the world to know that he was taking on the burden of obedience to God. So he was baptized by John. Jesus would go on to fulfill every law of God and then give his life on the cross. Here at his baptism Christ the Savior demonstrates God's mercy to save the world from sin.

When Jesus stepped into the Jordan River to be baptized he had no sins to wash away. He was already right with God because he was God. He was a man, but unlike any man before or after him. He was the sinless son of God and son of man. So when he stepped into the river that day he was showing himself to be fully one of us yet still God. He revealed that what he was about to do in his life would be enough to pay for the world's sins. But he was also making it personal for you and me. He showed that by getting down and washing in baptism we can be saved by being connected to Christ. It's the washing of rebirth and renewal that saves us.

Not long after Jesus was baptized he spoke with a man by the name of Nicodemus about rebirth. Nicodemus didn't get it, thinking that Jesus meant someone had to crawl back up inside their mother and come out all over again. Jesus was not thinking of a literal or physical rebirth and neither was Paul. **"He saved us by the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."** This is where people today get the idea of being born again. Old things die and remain dead. Baptism is a washing that makes people born again. The person born again comes back to life. Baptism takes spiritually dead people and makes them alive. So if you're baptized then you can say you've been born again.

Renewal is similar but slightly different. The washing of renewal is making a change for the better not in time but in quality. In baptism the Holy Spirit creates life and a new beginning inside a person that wasn't there before. The washing of renewal allows them new thoughts that are better than their old thoughts. It allows a new will that is better than their old will. Baptism is an inward renewal brought about and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Some groups think baptism isn't that important or it's something for the future. Paul would strongly disagree. **"He saved us by the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior; so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."** This washing of rebirth and renewal connects individuals to Christ Jesus in his death and in his resurrection by the Holy Spirit. By his grace our sins really are washed away. We really wear the covering of perfect righteousness and holiness that our Savior won for us on the cross. There's no doubt and there's no sin, guilt, or grief for those connected to Christ in baptism. We are heirs. God made a promise that those who washed in the baptism of rebirth and renewal have this eternal life. That's something to hope in today. Live knowing it's a fact.

In a moment we're going to confess the words of the Nicene Creed. Listen for the confession "we acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." For centuries the Christian Church has recognized that all believers are connected to Christ through the one baptism. Jesus began his ministry to save us with his own baptism. He demonstrated God's mercy to save us. He sends the Holy Spirit to make our baptisms a washing of rebirth and renewal to save us. We've been connected to Christ through baptism and we are saved.