

BAPTISMAL GUIDELINES FOR ST. MARK LUTHERAN CHURCH CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA

I. BRIEF THEOLOGY OF BAPTISM

Baptism, along with Holy Communion, is one of the two sacraments administered in the Lutheran Church. In baptism, the Triune God delivers us from evil, puts our sinful self to death, and adopts us as children, as members of the Church, which is the body of Christ. We are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and we are marked with the cross of Christ forever. Because we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, we are free from anxiety about our own death and are free to love and serve God and our neighbor.

We are baptized (at any age) once and for all because God's promise to us is once and for all. In baptism, we receive God's grace, and our faith is created and awakened in us. We are called to live lives of repentance and forgiveness, daily remembering God's promises to us made at our baptism. All our lives we remain simultaneously saint and sinner, and every day we die to sin and rise to new life as a result of our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We live out our baptism by living in the community of faith, by hearing the Word and receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion, and by being ambassadors of Christ in the world.

Baptism is not the end of the Christian life—it is the beginning. It is not a guarantee of salvation, but is a sign of God's love and grace. We can never earn this love and grace; God gives them to us freely. We are called in our baptism to live lives of praise and thanksgiving to God for this most generous gift.

II. BAPTISMAL PRACTICE AT ST. MARK

Baptism will occur during public Sunday worship. Prior to baptism, the pastor will discuss with those who wish to be baptized, or wish to have a child baptized, the meaning of baptism and the process. All baptismal candidates will require a sponsor. (A sponsor is a surrogate parent in Christ who promises to help the baptismal candidate grow in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.) Sponsors for baptism—and at least one of the parents in cases of baptizing children—must themselves be baptized Christians. The order of the baptismal service will be mutually agreed upon between the pastor and family of baptismal candidate.

III. APPENDIX: SHAPE OF THE RITE

The pattern for the celebration of Christian baptism has a simple yet profound center: washing in water and speaking the Word of God. From this center the pattern unfolds to include a gracious presentation of those to be baptized, the public profession of the faith of the church, other visible signs that amplify the meaning of baptism, and a welcome into the community of faith. Baptism is celebrated within the larger pattern of the Christian assembly's gathering around the Word of God and the Eucharistic meal. The powerful event of baptism in the assembly takes place within the larger pattern of formation in the faith, a lifelong process of discipleship.

PRESENTATION

The pastor may introduce the rite with a brief instruction about baptism, accenting themes that are developed elsewhere through scripture readings, preaching, music, and teaching. Sponsors who present candidates for baptism are baptized Christians who play a nurturing role in candidates' lives and who pledge to provide spiritual support in the future. Ordinarily such sponsors will be active participants in the life of the church, and it is advisable that at least one sponsor be a member of the congregation in which baptism occurs. The presentation includes statements expressing the mutual accountability of the baptized, the sponsors, and parents, and the whole Christian community. These responses reveal that the baptized are united with and surrounded by an assembly gathered by the grace of God, people who rely on that grace to support one another in their commitments.

PROFESSION

The rite of baptism makes clear that baptism involves turning away from all that opposes God and turning one's allegiance to the triune God. Because Christ has first defeated every evil power, those to be baptized are freed and empowered to renounce all evil. Because they have been called and led to faith by the Holy Spirit, those coming to baptism are freed and empowered to turn to Christ, in the faith that is itself God's gift. The candidates' simple declaration of commitment to Christ is followed immediately by the profession of faith of the whole church. IN solidarity with the candidate and as a sign of the ongoing renewal of baptism, the assembly joins in publicly declaring the faith. Ecumenical creeds join those to be baptized with the Christian community across time and space. The Trinitarian profession of faith also anticipates baptism in the name of the triune God.

BAPTISM

The pastor gathers the thanksgiving of the whole assembly into a prayer that blesses God for the gift of water, recalls significant events in the story of salvation in which water is a sign of God's deliverance, and prays for the blessing of the Holy Spirit upon the water and those to be baptized in it. Baptism is not an isolated event. Rather, it is connected to all of God's great actions in creating, redeeming, and enlivening the world.

The threefold washing with water in the triune name of God is essential to the liturgy of baptism. This is where utter dependence on the grace of God is most clearly revealed. All the baptized must be washed by someone else; it is a gift that may only be received. The gift is nothing less than life itself, for in this water a person dies with Christ and is raised by God to life in Christ.

The laying on of hands underscores what happens in baptism and gives thanks for God's presence in the newly baptized. The accompanying prayer asks that the gifts of the Holy Spirit, poured out on the baptized in the baptismal washing, continue to sustain and strengthen the life of the believer. The sign of the cross on the forehead is an ancient symbol

that the newly baptized has also become united to Christ's death and resurrection. Anointing with oil, a biblical sign of being called and anointed by God, may be used to further signify that each Christian is joined to the mission of God.

Being clothed in a new garment reflects, at one level, a gracious response to a human need: after bathing, one needs to have clean and dry clothes. The symbolism connected with this garment is that in baptism Christ fully enfolds each believer: all who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ. This symbol is echoed at the end of life when the clothing of a funeral pall is used to cover the coffin of a Christian who has died.

WELCOME

Presenting the newly baptized with a candle lighted from the congregation's paschal candle invites the newly baptized to join the community of faith in the mission of Christ. Walking in the light of God's pathways is both a delight and a duty. The congregation's active role in the welcome announces that the newly baptized have entered fully into the body of Christ, the household of faith. Every baptism enlarges the whole church on earth and contributes to the fulfillment of the great commission by Christ to the church (Matthew 28:19).