

The Baptism of Our Lord – January 14th, 2024

BROKEN TABLETS

Prayer

Lord, help us to understand and embrace the fact that we are no longer slaves to sin and that it holds no power over us, since we have become your servants and you, our Lord.

AMEN

A Rhetorical Question

Paul begins today's reading with a rhetorical question - a question asked in order to create a dramatic effect or to make a point rather than to get an answer. He does, though, answer his own questions with a resounding NO! We DO NOT sin MORE, so that God can appear MORE gracious.

Sin and the Law

We don't need the Ten Commandments to know that we are sinful. Even those without the law know this, as Paul writes in Romans (2:15):

*[The Gentiles] show that the **WORK** of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.*

The Baptism of Our Lord – January 14th, 2024

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In our vain attempts to think that we have kept the law, we make distinctions about which sins are worse than others, and what may even be deemed culturally acceptable and therefore excusable. While most of us would never consider lying in a court of law, we may feel it's ok to cheat on a test, fudge on our time cards, or omit income from our tax returns. At the start of last century, many Lutherans saw buying insurance as sinful – they were seen as not trusting in God alone – while at the same time having no qualms about treating people differently because of the color of their skin. Today, cohabitating with an opposite-sex partner may not be seen as sinful, while doing so with a same-sex partner is treated differently. All this is to say that, because we're in a fallen world, we can sin early and often without even realizing it.

And if any of you think that the law no longer is valid, Christ's words as recorded by Matthew should clarify that (Matt 5:17):

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

We confessed earlier in the service with these words:

The Baptism of Our Lord – January 14th, 2024 ***BROKEN TABLETS***

If you, O Lord, kept of a record of mine, O Lord, who could stand?

Indeed, we know that we have not kept the law and that God's justice demands that the penalty of death be paid. We have been found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

The Power of Sin

Sin blinds us to God's free offer of Salvation. How many times in the Gospels does Jesus talk about those that hear but do not understand, see but do not perceive? Paul summarized this in his letter to the Church at Corinth (1 Cor 1:18):

*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

While on our cruise, Karen and I rewatched the film version of *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. The visual connection that Lewis made between the physical cracking of the stone table and the end of sin's power was, well, powerful.

The Baptism of Our Lord – January 14th, 2024 ***BROKEN TABLETS***

The law doesn't have any power over us, since it's requirements were fulfilled in Christ's life, death, and resurrection from the dead, Satan therefore turns to a more subtle form of temptation. He uses all his efforts to keep us focused on the past, to remember and feel the shame and guilt of sins for which God has already forgiven us. He may even try to convince us that what we've done is unforgivable, or at least has rendered us useless for service in the Kingdom of God. If you feel that way, I suggest reading some of Chad Bird's writings, like the one [*Christianity Isn't for Everyone*] that you can find out our literature cart. Both he and St. Paul sinned much but have also been used by God in powerful ways.

A New Nature

As the text says, we have been joined to Jesus, made part of His body, the church, through our Baptism. Our sinful flesh remains, but we have received a heart transplant. As foretold by the Prophet Ezekial (36:26-28):

The Baptism of Our Lord – January 14th, 2024 ***BROKEN TABLETS***

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

So we do what the Law requires NOT because of the power of the Law, but because doing so is in accordance with our new natures. We indeed are no longer slaves to sin, but are servants of Jesus, our Lord and Master.

A Gift that Keeps on Giving

Unlike the Christmas presents that now may lie forgotten, the gift of Jesus at his birth was only the beginning.

We are a forgetful people and need to hear things over and over. I must confess that when Karen and I were first married (and I'm only a bit better now), I didn't verbalize my love of my wife often. I rationalized

The Baptism of Our Lord – January 14th, 2024
BROKEN TABLETS

that I had told her I loved her at least once, and that the situation hadn't changed, so why repeat myself? That went over like a lead balloon.

In a similar manner, in pronouncing the absolution earlier in the service, I wasn't forgiving some subset of your sins, maybe only the most recent ones or just the ones you remember, but was reinforcing and reiterating the fact that God has indeed forgiven ALL your sins, past, present, and future. Think of it as God saying, "I love you just as you are", each and every week.

Indeed, God loves it when we talk to Him and listen to what He has to say. We do this during the Divine services, as we hear the Word read, preached, and sung, and then respond with praise and prayer. We do this as we read *Portals of Prayer* and pray for the people on the back. We do this as we listen to podcasts from 1517 and discuss them with those around us. We do this when we open up the Bible and study it, both alone and with others, and listen to the insights the Holy Spirit has given others for our mutual benefit and consolation.

The Baptism of Our Lord – January 14th, 2024 ***BROKEN TABLETS***

I could go on with other examples, but the key point is that a relationship with Jesus isn't a 'one hour on Sunday' sort of relationship any more than going to the gym a hour a week is staying fit.

As Paul said to those in the Areopagus (Acts 17:24-28a)

*The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for "**In him we live and move and have our being**'*

Come, let us join our Lord in the foretaste of the feast to come, realizing that He is with us, here and now, in this Sacrament.

AMEN