

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see. “That saved a wretch like me!” The man who wrote these well known words was John Newton. His Christian mother died when he was seven years old. At the age of eleven he traveled with his dad on a merchant ship, picking up bad habits of sailors, drinking, swearing and carousing. Eventually he commanded his own ship, hauling slaves like cattle from Africa to England. Then it happened. In a terrible storm, while lashed to a helm of the ship, holding onto the ship’s wheel, and staring death in the face, his thoughts turned back to the Lord God he had come to know while sitting in the lap of his dear mother. He cried out in fear and anguish, “Lord have mercy on me.” He started reading the Bible and other devotional books, taught himself Hebrew and Greek, and became the pastor preaching to large crowds, even to the Queen of England. He wrote books and hymns extolling the grace of God “that saved a wretch like me.” “That’s the story of your life and mine. Let’s take a look at how, “The Amazing Kindness of God Saves Us!

God’s grace is universal. That does not mean all people will be saved and everyone is going to heaven regardless of what they believe. It does mean that God has provided salvation for all people. Our text says, “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. ” The kindness and love of our God is like the sun that shines, and the stars that appear at night, and the rain that falls. It is for all people. John 3:16 says, “God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son.” When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the Father spoke to the world and said, “This is my Son in whom I am well pleased, listen to him.” That amazing appearance of Jesus was for all people of every generation, not just those who were there at that moment in time along the banks of the Jordan River.

God’s kindness has appeared to people. It comes in the rain, the sun, the smiles of friends, the birth of a child, the jobs, the food we eat, even though people don’t deserve it. The Greek word is “epiphane” from which we get the word “Epiphany.” Have you ever been on the computer doing research on the Internet and suddenly advertising pops up or appears on your screen? That’s an epiphany, a sudden appearance. God’s grace and his kindness are that way. When Jesus was baptized he popped up and appeared as the one to rescue us. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit pointed to Jesus and said, “This is the one. Here is where you will find your salvation and hope of eternal life, not in the righteous things you do. Here is the ultimate evidence of God’s kindness and love for you.”

This kindness and love of God that appeared to people in places like the banks of the Jordan River, the manger in Bethlehem, the cross, and the open tomb is meant for all people, because all people need this kindness and help in their lives. If you were to open your Bible and read the verses before the verses just read to you, you would discover this description of humanity. “At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in male and envy, being hated and hating one another.” This is not just describing some drunken sailors that led John Newton into all sorts of sin. This is a description of all humanity who has fallen short of God’s glory.

One day, a little girl was sitting and watching her mother do the dishes at the kitchen sink. She suddenly notices that her mother has several strands of white hair sticking out in contrast on her brunette head. "Why are some of your hairs white, Mom?" she asks. Her mother replies, "Well, every time you do something wrong and make me cry or unhappy, one of my hairs turns white." The little girl thinks about this awhile, then asks, "So how come ALL of Grandma's hair is white?" The painful truth is we are not perfect. We are sinful. We sin against God and each other and it shows. We have not kept one commandment perfectly. Our love for God is not always as wholehearted as it should be, and it shows itself when our minds drift in prayer. We do not always gladly and willingly come to church. We're not always willing to share our time, talents and treasures with God. We gossip. We complain about others. Even the good things we do are not perfect. No matter how well we think we can curry favor with God, we always fail and fall short of his holy requirements.

Thank God that he saved us, not because of righteous things we tried to do, but because of his mercy. Oh, how we love that word mercy. It has the thought of being concerned about something or someone that is hurting or suffering. Did you ever have a pet that was suffering, and finally you reached the point where you showed the poor creature mercy by taking it to the vet and having it put to sleep? Even though you loved the animal and it brought you much joy in life, you did the hard thing. You showed mercy. Nothing in the realm of human experience compares to the mercy God showed you.

The Lord tells us in his word that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. A perfect and holy God cannot accept people the way they are in sin or he violates his own standards of justice. What God did was give us the gift of his Son, mark him at his baptism as the Christ who would sacrifice his life to save us. Jesus was willing and eager to show us mercy. He did not hesitate to become the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Romans 5 says of this kindness and love and mercy: "You see just at the right time, while we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly die, but God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Such is the kindness and goodness of our God that has appeared to us. Such is the mercy that saves us.

What good is all this love from God for me, if I think it is just a bunch of nonsense or foolishness? Or what if I find myself believing with a vast sea of humanity that the material blessings the Lord provides me are more valuable than the gift of his Son? Here is where the goodness and kindness of God steps in at another level. He saves me by leading me to believe in something that I would normally not accept or value. "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." The Holy Spirit was poured out on Jesus at his baptism. Our gospel for today said, "And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him bodily in the form of a dove." The Holy Spirit was poured out on you generously when you were born again and renewed. How clearly this new birth is described in Ephesians 2, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead

in trespasses and sin.”

Through the Gospel, the good news about Jesus, the Holy Spirit does the unthinkable. He enters dead hearts, these unclean temples, and he performs this most improbable miracle – he washes and renews. That Gospel is like detergent. It comes in two forms. Liquid or powder. Powder Gospel is the message about Christ in the Bible. Liquid Gospel is the waters of Baptism. In our baptism the Holy Spirit comes to us and creates saving faith in our hearts. We are reborn into a new relationship with God. What Jesus did at the cross, comes to us in our baptism.

It’s almost unthinkable! Yet think of it like this: In the flood, God destroyed all life on this earth with the exception of the occupants in the ark. The whole world was totally submerged under water. Everyone and everything was dead, rotting and decaying. Moses records for us the state the earth was in, he writes, “Every living thing that moved on the earth perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind.” Above the water the ark floated under sunny skies but beneath the water the earth was a mass grave. Can you imagine such a thing? Then the waters receded and when Noah came out of the ark, he saw the beautiful flowers and the green grass. The waters of the flood had washed all that filth of decaying bodies and death away. The earth was reborn. In the same way, our baptismal waters have washed away the decaying flesh of sin from us; returning us to that right relationship with God. Everything Christ did at Calvary comes to you in your baptism.

Your baptism was a special, unique act of God in your life that has significance each day of your life. Think of it this way. A husband or wife wears a wedding ring. That ring was a special gift from that person’s spouse, a one-time gift that signifies our spouse’s ongoing promise to love and care for us. Baptism is like that ring. Our baptism is a special one-time gift of God that communicates and delivers the promise that Christ has washed away our sins in his blood, that we are adopted into his family, and that he will stand by us every day of our lives.

We often use the word “hope” in our normal conversations. “I hope the weather will be nice tomorrow.” “I hope the traffic isn’t bad during rush hour.” “I hope my flight isn’t delayed.” When Christians talk about their faith, they use the word “hope” in a very different way. Christian hope is not a fingers-crossed, guessing sort of hope. Our Christian faith and hope does not involve guessing, worries, or uncertainty. What greater certainty, what greater kindness and love could we have than the atoning work our Savior did for us! What greater certainty, what greater kindness and love could we have than the washing from sin that God gave each one of us in Holy Baptism! What greater certainty, what greater kindness and love could we have than the rock-solid promises of God which point us forward to heaven! When I sometimes get discouraged with life, I look at cards I have saved in my file cabinet from my wife. Those cards might be worthless to anyone else, but to me they mean something special. The words of God and waters of baptism might not seem like much to the world, but I hope that each of us knows just how much kindness and love God shows us in baptism. After all, God’s love is not a superficial or fickle love, but a love that forgives – and love that forgives is love that inspires us to love him and trust his promise that one day he will allow us to experience his love for all eternity.