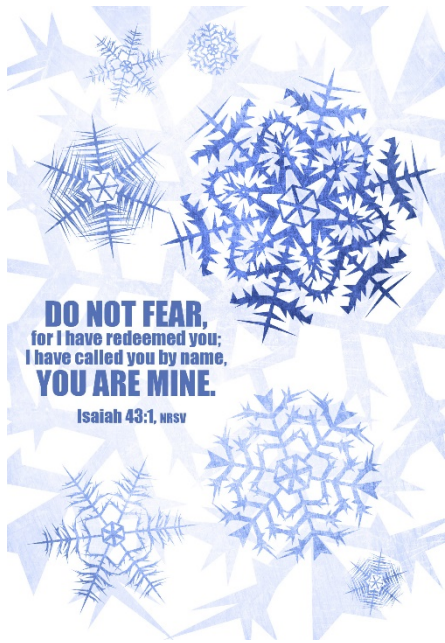


THE DEFINING TRUTH OF YOUR BAPTISM



If the local newspaper sent a reporter to your home to interview you for the lead front page article for the upcoming Sunday edition, you might be overwhelmed by the opportunity. Everyone gets the Sunday paper (usually for the ads and coupons). What will the entire world (or at least your local area) find out about you? With great excitement and anticipation, you agree to the interview. You welcome the reporter in and offer them coffee, water, and possibly a snack. You sit them in your favorite chair as a gracious host. The reporter gets right down to it by asking, “I want to share with all our readers what defines you. Do you have a defining moment? What makes you tick?” Your entire life flashes before your very eyes. Was it the home run or no hitter from your little league days? What about sitting on the homecoming court your senior year of high school? Could it be your high school or university diploma? Was it your faithful service in one of the Armed Forces? Or your university, masters or doctorate degrees? Maybe it was your choice of a spouse and your wedding vows? Was it the day your children or grandchildren were born? Could it be the gold watch you received for all your years on the job? Could it be the sports teams you root for? No matter what your age, it seems impossible to choose just one defining moment or even the one thing that actually defines your life.

May I be so bold as to suggest that your answer to the question “what is the defining truth of your life?” is just as important for the world to know as it is for you personally. Your answer serves as a dynamic witness of Jesus for the world. As children of God, we are defined by God and His saving and life-changing claim: YOU ARE MINE. At the moment of our baptism, God marks us and claims us: “You belong to Me!” The prophet Isaiah penned these words of God, “*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine*” (Isaiah 43:1). **Read this article** from your English District Evangelization Team to help you remember your baptism, help establish your baptism as the defining truth of your life, now and for eternity, and to equip you with a personal, dynamic witness of Jesus in your everyday life.

God defines and re-defines our lives in Christ.

These weeks before the Winter Olympics are always very exciting. Most Olympic hopefuls have prepared most of their lives for the opportunity to compete. I watched the national figure skating competition this past weekend as these athletes competed with the hope of representing the United States in Beijing in a few weeks. Reporters interviewed the skaters concerning their daily regimen in preparation for the competition. Most of the athletes have been engaged in rigorous training before they were preschool age. They train for 10 to 12 hours a day, seven days a week. Their opportunity to be an Olympic skater comes down to a few nerve-racking routines and the subjective opinion of a few judges. Can you imagine your life being defined by your flip, loop, toe loop or salchow? Or your identity based on your last four-minute program? Or your hopes crushed by a momentary slip, fall, or misstep? That’s what the Olympic athletes face across all disciplines in hope of competing for a medal.

American wrestler Kyle Snyder, 25, brought home the silver medal in the men's 97-kilogram final during the Tokyo Games. His success wasn't just an individual win, but one that helped bring the American wrestling team's total 2020 Olympic medal count to nine—higher than any other nation and the highest the team's achieved since 1984. The reporters wanted to know if Snyder was disappointed in his silver medal. He responded, "As big as the sport is in my life, **wrestling doesn't define me. God alone defines me.** I'm always consistent with my Scripture study and prayer, and during the pandemic I was able to continue to grow and focus on God and hear what He wanted to teach me." Snyder's Twitter bio includes a verse from Deuteronomy 20:1: "*When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you*" (NIV).

The world wants to define the individual by the old Wide World of Sports intro: "the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat." For a few athletes this may mean the iconic image of their success on the front cover of *Sports Illustrated*. But for the vast majority, it means a life of "not good enough." And it's not just in sports. My son competed in the National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C. Like the Olympic hopefuls, many of these students had their noses in the dictionary from a very young age. Only 300+ spellers competed at this level. Upon the misspelling of a word, four counselors awaited the contestant to help them cope with the disappointment of not knowing how to spell a word you would never use in conversation. How tragic that these young people, even for a moment, face the deep, heart-wrenching despair over a misspelled word. But that's a microcosm of our world today. Do you measure up or not? What has what you have done or not accomplished say about you?

God created the world to live in relationship with Him. That is what defined the life of Adam and Eve prior to sin entering the world. Sin severed this relationship. But in Genesis 3:15, God immediately responded with a Gospel message to crush the head of Satan and purchase His precious people back from sin, death, and the power of the devil. God did this by sending His only begotten Son whose perfect life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection make it possible for all who believe in Jesus to be saved. Jesus instituted baptism to be God's saving work. Whether you were carried to the baptismal font or you walked up to it yourself, baptism is a passive act. But baptism is an active gift. Through the water and God's Word in baptism, faith is created, sin is forgiven, the continual presence of God and His Spirit are promised, one dead in sin is made alive in Christ, and deliverance from sin, death, the grave and the power of the devil is given. The text of Isaiah 43:7 makes manifest God's truth: "*everyone who is called by My name, whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and made.*"

The words of Phil Wickham's song, "Living Hope" fill the heart of the baptized child of God with such confidence: *Who could imagine so great a mercy? What heart could fathom such boundless grace? The God of ages stepped down from glory to wear my sin and bear my shame; The cross has spoken, I am forgiven; The King of kings calls me His own; Beautiful Savior, I'm Yours forever; Jesus Christ, my Living Hope. Then came the morning that sealed the promise. Your buried body began to breathe. Out of the silence, the Roaring Lion declared the grave has no claim on me. Jesus, Yours is the victory! Hallelujah, praise the One who set me free; Hallelujah, death has lost its grip on me; You have broken every chain; There's salvation in Your name; Jesus Christ, my Living Hope!* God's gift of creation defines our lives and His gift of baptism redefines our entire existence in His mercy and grace.

“I am baptized!” What does this mean?

Mark this truth well and treasure it with every breath for the rest of eternity: **Your life, now and forever, is defined by your baptism into Christ.** Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River marked the beginning of our Lord’s active, earthly ministry. Jesus goes down into the water as the righteous Son of God but comes out wearing the stain of your sin, my sin, all the sin of the world for all time. Because of His baptism, we go into baptism’s living waters as the filthy, sinful-by-nature and sinful-by-thought, word and deed people marked with death only to rise up clean and marked by the Cross of Christ crucified for new and everlasting life. Jesus’ baptism identified Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; our baptism imparts our new identity as the children of God. Baptism is life-changing and life-defining. Here God marks us and claims us: “I love you! You are Mine!! You belong to Me!!!”

I have told the same story at every wedding I have done in my 29 years of ministry. It goes like this: A certain man was the owner of a prized MG. He loved this car and spent every spare moment making sure every square inch of his precious possession was repaired, renewed, and polished. His wife of five years would gaze into the garage occasionally, and he would always say, “Beth, if you want to drive her, the car, you can do it anytime.”

She would close the door quickly to hide the tears that came from thinking that if anything ever happened to that car, it would ruin everything - including their marriage. But the day came when Beth had no choice but to drive the car. So, with great trepidation, she reached for the keys and drove the car to the pharmacy to pick up a prescription for their child. She parked where no cars were even 50 feet away. She ran in and out of the store and was heading safely home when, suddenly, in the corner of her eye, she saw a child riding a bicycle coming into the street from behind a parked car. She swerved to avoid the child but crashed right into another parked car on the other side of the road.

As she sat behind the wheel in tears, in fear that she had ruined everything, destroyed her husband’s pride and joy, a police officer asked for her insurance and drivers’ license. As she reached into the glove box, she noticed a note attached to the insurance card. It read, “Beth if you’re reading this, it means that you probably crashed my car. First of all, I pray that you’re okay. But especially I want you to know that it’s you that I love, not this car.” The tragedy of this story is NOT that the MG was totaled (which many a man would think) but rather that Beth didn’t know every single day that it was her that her husband loved, not that car.

Satan comes into our lives with pandemics, tragedies, failures, cancer, gossip, divorce, revenge, inconsistencies between words and actions - you name it and he has it, including death - all to say - this wouldn’t be happening if you truly belonged to God. At this time of year, right after the holy days of Advent and Christmas, in the Epiphany season, counselors and psychologists suggest these are the days most filled with despair, depression, and anxiety. What better time than now to clarify what is our real defining identity in life? Our defining identity is not found in the “new me” because of the weight lost or gained, our newfound resolutions, the gifts that we received, or even the connections we made with family and friends. Rather, our defining identity is with God, who came to identify Himself with us.

I am baptized!

Baptism is at the heart of the Christian faith because it is God pursuing us for life - finding us in the midst of sin and death to give us new life through His name. We bear the name of God's beloved sons and daughters with whom God is well pleased. God gives us a daily, moment by moment, defining identity - so that no matter what temptation, burden, or challenge that tears at the very core of our being, we hear those wonderful words from God, "It's you that I love! You are Mine!"

Before the Lord came to them, Israel was nothing. They were a stiff-necked, idolatrous, and rebellious people. They were enslaved and embittered. Can you imagine the joy that must of have filled the prophet Isaiah's heart to overflowing when he was given these words of proclamation (Isaiah 43:1): *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine."* Isaiah was given words of Law calling the people to repentance. But he was also given these words of Gospel: God is at work to save you. You belong to Him. But "while they were yet sinners," God came to them and identified with them. He recreated them to be His own treasured possession by placing His name on them. God still creates the Church, His Body, today. In the waters of baptism, God re-creates us, and we become His own.

The Lord forms us daily through His Word, but we continue to rebel and resist. We turn away and try other things. There are "fires" and "floods" we pass through that test our faith and try our patience. Nevertheless, through His Word, the Lord continues to form us, shape us, and mold us, as the potter molds and shapes a lump of clay, to be His people. When we are "out of shape" because of our sin, the Lord remolds us with His mercy and grace. Through the confession of our sin and the assurance of forgiveness won for us through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we are re-formed daily. He sees that we are His "treasured possession." He loves us.

God doesn't want even a moment to go by that we don't know for certain that we are loved, we are His, and we are heirs to all His blessings. That's why, as I led worship all those years prior to my disability, I asked my church family to begin worship and to begin each day prior to their feet hitting the floor in the morning by tracing the sign of the cross upon the forehead and heart in remembrance of their baptism where God makes this promise and gives you your defining identity for life. God has made His people into who we are - His own, sons and daughters. We are who we are because of the grace of God. HE has made us - His work alone - to be His through water and the Spirit. Our identity is with Him.

Remember your baptism! A great idea but do we?

The Sunday in the church year that we celebrated this past week (the baptism of our Lord) gives us reason once again to remember our own baptism. Do you know your baptismal birthday? Who was (were) your godparent(s) or sponsor(s)? Who was the pastor who baptized you? In what church? What a great impetus to take the time necessary to reflect on this gift of our defining identity! It's also a great time to thank God for all those who had a part in your baptism and for the daily blessings which flow from God's promises to you which last for a lifetime. Celebrate your baptism! Why? Baptism gifts you with faith to believe in Jesus. Baptism opens heaven for you. It offers you the presence of Christ and His Holy Spirit. Baptism proclaims you to be God's dear child. Attached to Christ in baptism, sin, death, the grave and the power of the devil has been conquered. What a tremendous blessing we

have in remembering our baptism daily as we trace the cross upon our forehead and heart and say the words, "I am baptized!"

Unfortunately, we often don't see the blessings of our baptism because, if we were baptized as an infant, we simply don't remember it at all. And who brings it up in discussion? Or if we witness a baptism during the worship service, we fail to take to heart all that God gifts to the child through baptism. Therefore, it makes sense that we fail to witness concerning the faith and grace received in baptism because we fail to recollect the defining blessings received through it. We don't remember our baptism, period, much less the powerful and life-changing blessings received from God through it. This leads us to doubt whether something as simple as water and the Word of God can make such a huge difference in our lives.

Our doubts often overwhelm us. One person who knew doubting quite well, who struggled with doubt his whole life, was that famous reformer, Martin Luther. Over the course of his life, Martin Luther suffered great bouts of anxiety and depression. He would have crises of faith so severe that he doubted his own salvation. At times he became so frightened he had visions of Satan standing before him, ready to usher him through the gates of hell. So, he placed a large plaque in his room that said: "**Remember your baptism.**" Luther understood that the fact of his baptism was much stronger than any doubt or anxiety he might produce. It is said that because his bouts with depression were so severe, he would repeat as a mantra: "I am baptized! I am baptized!"

So I also say, remember your baptism! For in your baptism is the gift of this most important truth: you are greatly loved by God. God has called you by name, and God finds great delight in you. Nothing can separate you from that truth. But you can choose to cast aside the faith given to you at your baptism. God will not force you to be His. Therefore, I urge you to daily remember your baptism. When you, in your youth, feel overwhelmed with a world that scoffs at faith, remember your baptism! When you, in middle age, start to realize, that you are probably on the downhill side of life, that there are fewer years left than have been lived and you haven't accomplished all that you thought you would and a sense of disappointment and disillusionment creeps in, remember your baptism! When you, in your senior years see your friends and spouses leave this world and realize that your years are also coming to a close and you fret about what follows, remember your baptism! When we all wonder if we're really making a difference as the Church, the Body of Christ, in this place, remember your baptism!

I often used the song, "You Are My Own," by Gerald Patrick Coleman to encourage others to remember their baptisms. It goes like this: *The splash of the water! The pow'r of the Word! The Spirit now binds you to Jesus your Lord! And wonder of wonders! Though by sin defiled; The Father in heaven; Now makes you His child! Refrain: A child of the promise His death has fulfilled! An heir of the covenant sure as His throne! His promise is "I shall be always with you;" His covenant, "You are My own." To Him you belong now; His grace be adored! His grace which sustains as you grow in the Word! And grace of all graces! The vic'try He won; Is your vict'ry now through your faith in the Son! Refrain: Your faith is a gracious miraculous gift: A miracle just like His rising from death. Both miracles yours now in baptism's flood; Secured by the covenant sealed with His blood.*

Can we ever hear enough that we are loved? Can we ever hear too many times that we are no longer enslaved by sin and guilt? Can we ever be encouraged enough that we belong? That our lives are

significant? Can we ever hear the proclamation that God has conquered death and the grave - our greatest fears - enough? You know the answer. Certainly not! Therefore, also, think about and pray for the person who has never heard this. Consider the person who doesn't have this defining truth to direct their lives now and for eternity. That's why the Church has encouraged the use of godparents and sponsors for the baptized. It's because you can't hear the truth of your baptism enough.

Godparents and sponsors do make a difference!

The use of godparents, sponsors or witnesses is not commanded by Scripture. However, it is a good Church custom which has many benefits. It began in the early Church when parents were being persecuted for their faith. They often were not granted the privilege of raising their own children. Because of the persecutions, they wanted to make sure that someone would help their child grow strong in the knowledge of Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord. Thus, they gave their child the gift of a spiritual guardian to help assure that glorious and eternal reunion in heaven through faith in Jesus Christ. In addition to serving as sponsors, godparents can assume responsibility, as the Holy Spirit permits and gives opportunity, for the Christian education of their godchild, especially if their parents should die or prove neglectful. They also will remember their godchild daily in their prayers.

I was gifted with wonderful godparents. They exemplified everything that was expected of godparents, and they took the vow they promised at my baptism seriously: *"From this day forth I ask you to be witnesses to John of the blessings which God has given him today and will continue to do in his life. Remember him daily in your prayers. As he grows and matures be mindful of his growth in the wisdom and knowledge of the Lord. Will you, therefore, promise to be a faithful witness to him, bringing him to the services of God's house and teaching him the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments? Will you help him as he grows to read and study the Holy Scriptures, to provide for his instruction in the Christian faith, that believing God's promise to him and living under this promise in communion with the Church, he may lead a godly life until the Day of Jesus Christ? If so answer, : I will with the help of God."* Even though I don't remember them saying it, I believe they boldly and with great conviction responded: I will with the help of God.

God certainly enabled them to do this faithful and loving work joyfully and to trust God to complete what they were unable to do. In all the years of my ministry, I have been blessed to lift up my godparents as examples of how to serve in this role. The role of godparent and sponsor certainly made a difference in my life. Their presence in my life at every juncture was a reminder of my baptism and Christ's enduring presence. They gave me birthday gifts on my baptismal birthday to emphasize that as important as the day of my birth was, it pales in comparison to the day I became a child of God. They would recollect the day for me and how much it meant to be adopted and baptized on the same day. They were present for all the momentous occasions in my life - from sporting events, to graduations, to family gatherings, to my wedding, my ordination and installation in my first congregation. Although they have now passed, I continue to thank God for the difference they made in my life by lifting up the blessings of my baptism to me. I joyfully look forward to the reunion in heaven with Christ, my parents and my godparents.

Do you know who your godparents or sponsors are? Have you thanked them for serving in this critical role? Have you forgiven them for the times they failed? Baptism is not a momentary or magical act. It

is a life-long relationship to be daily celebrated and affirmed. And that's what godparents and sponsors do. Thanks be to God.

Your life-defining baptism is a powerful witness to the world.

Since we are His, then, we confess Him, serve Him, and work at connecting other people to Him until the Lord comes again. He sacrificed His Son in order to gather people from the ends of the earth - north, south, east, west - to be formed as one holy Christian and apostolic Church. God's voice is still communicating His will for our lives. Like Jesus, we cling to the promise of the Spirit and hold tightly to the words that accompanied the water with the voice of God Himself. "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the sign of the cross forever."

That voice is our hope. That voice of promise is an awesome gift in the face of all that occurs in the course of our day. Once again, consider those who have never heard this voice of hope or the promise of God's saving grace. Satan will daily accuse us: if you belong to God, why do you continue to fall into sin? That's a strong accusation. Even convincing at times. That is, until we hear God's voice in the promises of baptism. God doesn't communicate to us that we will never sin again, but He does promise that in our broken and sinful condition, we are washed clean and made new and there is no limit to this cleansing; there is no limited warranty, no fine print. Jesus went into the waters of the Jordan as the righteous Son of God but comes out wearing the stain of our sin. And we go into baptism's living waters as the sinful flesh marked with death only to rise up as clean, forgiven, redeemed children belonging to God. His voice seeks to communicate this precious truth to us daily - and through us to the world around us! We have the message broken people like us are longing to hear.

Baptism is not merely a one-time affirmation that melts away over time. It is an all-time affirmation that grows over time. It changes our very being, not just our temporary self-image. As a result of baptism's grace, we are empowered to do things we couldn't do - forgiving, giving, interrupting our own schedule to help someone else, spending our energies on others rather than ourselves, healing through loving, loving despite not liking, being able to enjoy the blessings of God, and being connected to His presence, now and for eternity.

I was not a pastor at the time our children were born. I wrote my Master of Divinity paper on the "Baptismal Apologetic." The time I spent in researching that paper taught me a great deal about proclaiming the blessings and defining identity of baptism and defending this truth to the world. Just like I imagine that the prophet Isaiah couldn't wait to share the truth of God that **His work alone** is to make the claim, "You are Mine," as the children of God we are filled with the eagerness and joy of sharing the blessings of baptism with a broken world.

Witnessing is Christ at work in the child of God. If I can be so bold as to quote from my own paper, *"The Christian does not use the baptismal apologetic premise of undeniability as persuasive device directed toward the unbeliever or de-churched saying, 'Therefore you should believe this'; or, 'This is why you must believe the grace of baptism'; but rather, 'I cling to the grace and promise of the Gospel that I received at my baptism for it daily leads me to repentance and the comfort in the forgiveness of my sin and eternal life.' Baptism is the contact point between the unbeliever and the cross of Christ. True Christian apologetics links the broken, the unbeliever, the de-churched to the power of the*

Gospel.” What would it take for us, as broken people, to share God’s Word and the defining truth of baptism with a broken world?

When it came to the birth of our first granddaughter, my wife and I were overwhelmed with joy to witness her baptism. At the moment when our son (also an LCMS pastor) splashed the water on her head and shared God’s Word, none of us would know what the future would hold for this little girl. We prayed that her life would be full of joy and health and peace, but we also knew that, because she is a human being, she would also face pain and loss and sorrow. We knew, as the prophet Isaiah knew, that faith does not shield us from the realities of this life. Our granddaughter would, like all of us, pass through the waters of life’s hardships. She would cross the rivers of life’s pains, and she would walk through the fire of being a human being. But thanks be to God, we also know and confess that God knows her name. He created her, formed her in the womb, redeemed her in His grace, and calls her by name. She belongs to Him. He came to her and will be with her at every turn. Before we could even hold her little hand, God already had. I can’t imagine watching our grandchildren grow up in this world without the promises of baptism and the mark of Christ Crucified on their forehead and heart.

So, too, your baptism is a moment of insight - it’s all made crystal clear - we are connected to God, **therefore it’s also a charge into mission** - to bring this love and belonging to the world around us. You are the people God created, formed, and made to be His redeemed; you are His only because of what He continues to complete in your life through Word and Sacrament. With every breath you take, know God’s affirmation: He is faithful, and He will always be there to give you, a child of God, a life filled with grace, hope, and eternal salvation in Him. God would see it as a tragedy if ever a moment went by that you didn’t hear His loving voice declare, “It’s you that I love. You are Mine!”

I was thankful this week for the blessings which flowed from the *Making Disciples for Life: The Rock in Shifting Sand* Conference. Many speakers gave an appeal of how to bear witness of Jesus to a broken world. God’s Word encourages and equips us. Our baptism gives us the blessing of a relationship with Jesus and His heart to “*seek and to save the lost*” (Luke 19:10). Baptism is not just the gift of Christ’s presence, it is the gift of Christ Himself. Years ago, the Holy Spirit led me to choose Galatians 2:20 as my life defining Scripture: “*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.*” This truth is reaffirmed for me in the remembrance of my baptism. My late parents and godparents along with my spouse and family encourage me daily in this faith. And walking together in the faith and the defining truth of my baptism through the power of the Holy Spirit I can daily say, “I am loved. I belong to God. I am His. I am baptized.”

My funeral service someday will use the LSB hymn, #594, “God’s Own Child, I Gladly Say It” as the Hymn of Invocation: “*God’s own child, I gladly say it: I am baptized into Christ! He, because I could not pay it, gave my full redemption price. Do I need earth’s treasures many? I have one worth more than any; that brought me salvation free Lasting to eternity. Death, you cannot end my gladness: I am baptized into Christ! When I die, I leave all sadness To inherit paradise! Though I lie in dust and ashes Faith’s assurance brightly flashes: baptism has the strength divine. To make life immortal mine.*” (vss. 1,4). I certainly hope that both in life and in death I can proclaim to the world that I am loved by God and I belong to Him.

Why is it that we are never ashamed to tell all the world what team we root for (even if it means direct confrontation over it), or bear witness to a great movie we just watched, or share our favorite food or restaurant? Most times these things are plastered all over our clothes or our homes. We gladly display our love for these things by the money we are willing to invest in them. But bear witness of Jesus concerning our faith and what defines us to the core? Well, we all fall short there, don't we?!

Therefore, I ask you to join me in this prayer for myself, for you and for all the children of God. *Lord, equip and empower me through both Your Word and my actions that they would reveal (make manifest – Epiphany) that You alone define my life now and for eternity. You and Your saving truth take away my fears – even of death – and make me tick! Let the decisions I make, the TV I watch, the jokes I tell (even the dumb ones), the friends I choose – EVERYTHING – ALL OF MY LIFE – proclaim that I belong to You. I am Yours. Use my daily witness of this truth (all I say and do) to tell the broken that Your grace is greater than any sin and that You alone have removed the sting of death and the grave. Lead the world around me to ask, like the reporter, what defines me and what makes me tick. Through Your Spirit, may my witness of Jesus boldly declare Your love in the defining truth: I am baptized!*

The English District Evangelization Team would love to hear from you. Were you able to attend the *Making Disciples for Life* Conference - either in person or virtually? Please share your thoughts and discoveries. What does the remembrance of your baptism mean to you? We would love to share your response, pending your permission, during this Epiphany season. Contact us at this email: evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org We look forward to hearing from you. Like the prophet Isaiah, what a privilege we have to share the Good News that God is at work making the world His.

In Christ Alone,
Pastor John Diener
Galatians 2:20