

For the

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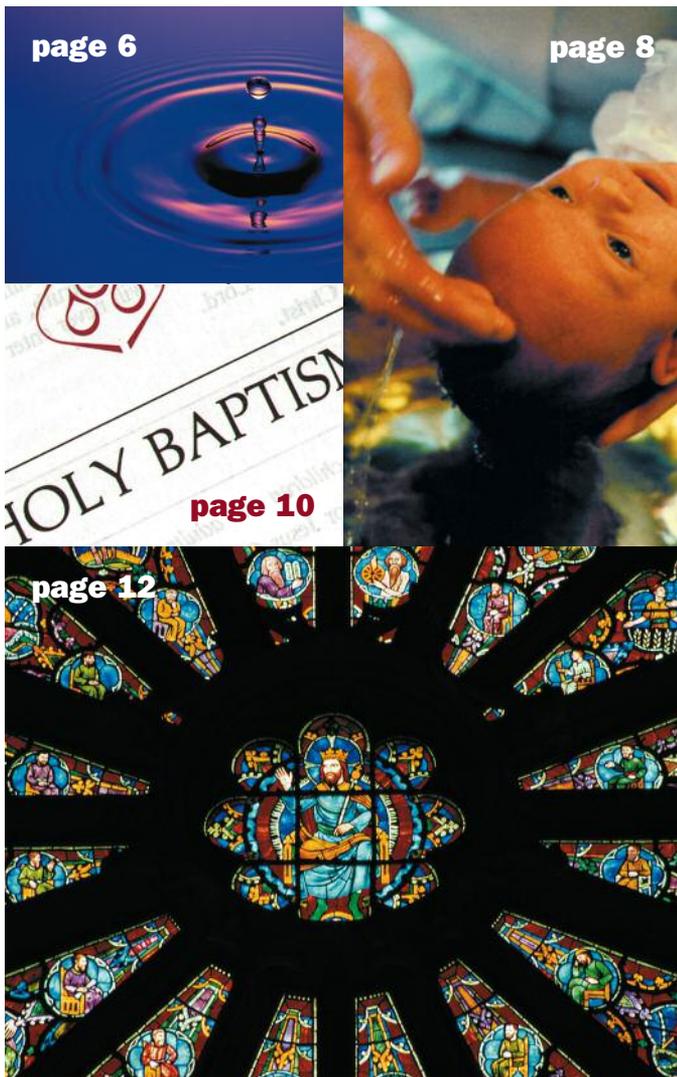
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Cover Photo: The cover photo features the baptism of Renee Lee Knepper, infant daughter of Pam Knepper, Managing Editor of *For the Life of the World*, and the Rev. Grant A. Knepper, Assistant Pastor at Faith Lutheran Church, Tucson, Ariz.

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Baptism:

Christ Marks Us as His Own

A three year delay in the publication of the Baptism volume in the *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics* series allowed me to come across any number of pertinent items in Luther about this Sacrament. For him Baptism was more than an initiation rite, but was virtually synonymous with the entire Christian life. Being a Christian and being baptized was the same thing. Baptism allows us to see ourselves as Christians and sets the church's boundaries. The baptized community is the church—or is it the other way around? It is the foundation Sacrament for the other church rites. Confirmation is the affirmation of Baptism and Confession and Absolution is the practice of Baptism. Except for the outward form of the Sacraments, Lutherans often do not distinguish the benefits of one Sacrament from another especially in regards to the benefits. All the means of grace, including the preached Word, give the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Homogenizing the Word and the Sacraments blurs the distinct value and operation of each, an approach common to Reformed theology as was evident with the renowned Karl Barth, the father of Neo-Orthodoxy, the theology popular at mid-century. A resurgence of sacramental interest in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod from the same period focused on the Lord's Supper. Now Confession and Absolution is receiving some attention. Of all the mysteries the church celebrates, the Eucharist is most profound through which we Christians as God's priests enter with our High Priest to be included in His self-offering to the Father and to receive the benefits of His atonement in eating and drinking His sacrificial body and blood. Undergirding the solemnities of that Sacrament is the prior and fundamental mystery of Baptism by which we are included in Christ's death and resurrection and so are made members of His own Body, the Church. Baptism and Holy Communion are complementary Sacraments with one requiring the other, but without one being allowed to be substituted for the other. In Baptism we become part of Christ and in Holy Communion He becomes part of us. The Holy Spirit by Baptism unites us with the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who unites us with His Father. Now we are marked with the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and are found acceptable to share in Christ's sacrifice through Holy Communion. Baptism may be seen only as a rite for children. Holy Communion happens every Sunday or at least once a month. Baptism is usually practiced less often. Our focus is more often directed to the altar from which we receive Christ's body and blood than it is to the baptismal font. It attracts our attention on those Sundays when it is used.

A recent remodeling of the seminary's Kramer Chapel allowed for an expanded choir loft. Beneath the enlarged loft is a chapel within the Chapel with pews facing a baptismal font carved from Indiana limestone in the middle of the aisle. Here, the font serves first as the focus of a small chapel area used for daily matins and vespers with their smaller attendance of twenty or so persons. Placed squarely behind the center doors of the narthex opening into the nave, it blocks the central aisle. Each person entering the main chapel through the center doors has to decide on which side of the font to walk. In leaving chapel he has to make that decision again. It is impossible to walk straight down the aisle. A procession into the chapel for special services no longer proceeds in perfect formation. The baptismal font is an impediment to order-

God finds His home in the water of Baptism and on that account it can do such great things as forgive sins, grant life and salvation, and actually confer the power of Christ's resurrection.

ly traffic and forces all those who pass it to ask why an obstacle was placed right in the middle of the aisle. It is as if John the Baptist were standing at the chapel doors telling us to repent of our sins. He points us to the baptismal font where we can find Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Every font is a reminder to every Christian that he or she was once baptized into Christ and that the Holy Trinity came to live in him or her. Something like this happened in the Old Testament story of Baalam whose way was blocked when the animal which carried him saw an angel of the Lord. That font blocks our path so that we by faith see the Holy Trinity in the water who joined Himself to us in Baptism.

Some years ago a portable, non-pretentious baptismal font stood in the front of the chapel. It was largely ignored except for times when one or two students had their children baptized there. A layperson wrote a letter arguing that since the seminary community was not an incorporated congregation, the font had no place in a student chapel. The easy and yes, coward's way out of that complaint, was its removal. It was not particularly attractive and seemed to be no more than a meaningless piece of furniture, a nuisance, which had to be moved when the chapel was full.

Luther had a different focus on Baptism. God finds His home in the water of Baptism and on that account it can do such great things as forgive sins, grant life and salvation, and actually confer the power of Christ's resurrection. God's presence in Baptism is more than His working in every place in the universe, but in Baptism He takes us and our children to Himself and He comes to live within us. Through Jesus we share in the divine nature. We become the temple of God and the Holy Spirit dwells within us. In the Old Testament the presence of God was dreadful. Israel stayed far from Sinai because God was on that mountain. Isaiah saw God in the temple and trembled. Can a man see God and live? And the answer is no. But in Baptism we come face to face with God. Instead of wrath and death, we are given the life of God Himself and our sins become permanently past tense. The unapproachable God approaches us in water.

During the past few years, students from the former Soviet Union have been on the Fort Wayne campus. These Russian-speaking seminary students have a real commitment to our Lutheran Confessions. They also bring with them their own piety, which is influenced by Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which is unfamiliar to most Americans. In passing by the baptismal font, some of these students instinctively put their hands into the water and make the sign of the cross across their breast in the traditional Russian way. For some this is novel. Perhaps it should not be. Luther urges us to kneel at the baptismal font because from there the voice of the Holy Trinity sounds. Making the sign of the cross at the baptismal font or kneeling is our confession that the God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush speaks to all Christians through His Son in Baptism to give us His Spirit.

✠ In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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