

Levenhagen Update

March 2024

Thoughts from Aaron

A Matter of Death and Life

As we journey through Lent, it's natural to feel the unrelenting weight of the Cross and the solemnity of Christ's path to the horror of Golgotha. It's a profound time, but it can also be heavy on our hearts. I found myself pondering: perhaps it's time for a moment of respite? How might we engage with God's Word in a way that revitalizes our spirit and connects us more deeply—something that might be a transformative experience, not just a ritual, but a personal journey of reflection and hope.

In our quest to find a silver lining, let's shift our focus to a more light-hearted topic: *drowning*. The CDC reports that in the U.S. there are about 4,000 fatal unintentional drownings annually. That breaks down to roughly eleven lives lost each day, making it the fifth leading cause of unintentional injury death. Now here's where it gets interesting—despite what we've seen in films and TV shows, drowning is often silent and goes unnoticed. Contrary to what you might think, there's usually no splashing, waving, or shouting. Surprising, isn't it?

The real signs of drowning are not as obvious as we think. Experts call it the "Instinctive Drowning Response." Lifeguards are trained to spot these subtle clues: First, except in rare cases, drowning people are physically unable to call for help. Our bodies naturally prioritize breathing even over desperately crying out. Second, forget flailing arms; they're too busy trying to push down on the water to keep their mouth above it. Third, moving towards help or grabbing a lifeline? Not an option. They're locked in a battle with the water. Fourth, with a lifeguard's intervention, a person struggling will only last between twenty to sixty seconds before going under. It's all down to our nervous system kicking into survival mode—totally involuntary and automatic. It's a chilling thought. Drowning is a

"Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through Baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life."

(Romans 6:3–4, NASB)



Above: Faculty processing into the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus for the Opening Service for the 2023/2024 Academic Year

Prayer Requests

- **Aaron & Jill** – leading the family well during this season of so many transitions, for healing from medical issues, for the courage to trust and wait on God during this time of excitement and uncertainty.
- **Nathan** – for wisdom in his decisions about his future, safety as he starts another season of racing, and that God would continue to grow him into a confident man of faith.
- **Faith** – for joy in the remainder of the school year, for peace and comfort with the changes that are to come, for hope in what God is going to do for her and with her in the future.

Thoughts From Aaron (con.)

(continued from front)
matter of death and life.

What about you? Let's take a moment to reflect on a day that might not stand out in your memory—the day you “died.” Picture this: a judge, with a stern look, declares that despite your tender age, your kind of evil is no longer welcome in the community. The verdict? A sentence of death by drowning. Your pleas that you were “too young to die” fell on deaf ears. The sentence had been passed; the pool of water prepared. In your prison cell you were dressed in your finest. The time comes and overcome with emotion, your parents walk with you to the water's edge. Your distraught parents' faces are a mix of sorrow and hope for a last-minute reprieve. A still falls over the crowd. You're handed into the arms of another assigned to carry out the sentence. You're plunged into the water and submerged. And in that instant, you “died.”

Sounds dramatic, doesn't it? But here's the twist: the day you “died” was actually the day of your Baptism. Surprised? It's a peculiar way to talk about Baptism, I know. We're used to hearing about the grace and the blessings it brings—how it marks the beginning of a spiritual journey and makes us pleasing to God. Even so, it is a kind of death—a death to an old life of sin and a rebirth into something new and glorious. So, in a sense, that was the day you died...and the day you truly began to live.

In the Sacrament of Baptism, we entrust our children just as our forebears did for us. It's a divine dance where God leads with His Word—active, creating, resurrecting, regenerating, re-creating, life-giving, and Incarnate. And it was this Incarnate Word who commanded that it must be so (Matt. 28:19). This Word doesn't just speak; it acts, gifting faith and nurturing our trust in His promises. Merged with the water, this Word of God renews, regenerates (Titus 3:5), re-creates (John 1:12-13; 3:3), and saves (Mark 16:16; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21)—washes away the old, breathes life into the new, and anchors us firmly in His grace. Sin drags us down and kills, but promise-bearing Word of

and the Holy Spirit's power immerses us only to raise us up anew.

Reflecting on the instinctive drowning response, isn't it a poignant picture of our spiritual plight? Burdened by sin, we're like those unable to cry out, heads barely above the water, unable to even reach for rescue. We're in dire need of a Savior to do what we cannot—lift us from the depths. In this light, Baptism is not just a ritual to satisfy family traditions; it's a rescue mission, a matter of death and life, where we're saved from clutches of sin and brought into the embrace of eternal life.

Paul understood that, when it comes to sin and Baptism, it was a matter of death and life. He speaks of death—not as an end, but as a beginning. Fourteen times in eleven verses he connects death to Baptism. Through Baptism, we experience a death that is beyond symbolic. It is very real indeed. Just as our Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross, we too, die to sin through Baptism, breaking free from its grip. Our old, terminally flawed, sinful nature inherited from Adam is submerged and drowned in baptismal waters, and our sins are washed away. It's not about what we've done; it's about what Christ has done for us—His perfect life, His sacrificial death, His triumphant resurrection, His ascension, and His glorious session. It's through Him that we shed our old selves and are reborn as children of God.

Paul challenges us to remember this transformative moment: *“Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?”* (Rom 6:3). It's a call to recall our own “crucifixion” with Christ, where our former selves were cast out and “killed,” freeing us from the dominion of sin (Gal. 2:20). Death to life. It's a reminder that the life we now live, we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave Himself for us. Have we forgotten that in Him, we are no longer slaves to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:6)?

Paul's question is a heart-stirring one: *“Have you forgotten that when [you] were joined with Christ Jesus*

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in Baptism, [you] joined Him in His death?" (Rom. 6:3). If we're perfectly honest, it can easily slip our minds, lost in the ebb and flow of daily life. Perhaps it's this forgetfulness that allows guilt to take hold, chaining us to our past mistakes. We don't all know that. We forget it frequently. Just maybe, that's why we're so overtaken by guilt and imprisoned in the bondage of sin. Howard Senkbeil writes, "That's why the memory of past sins haunt us, and the burden of our present guilt crushes us.... [We can't shake] the habit of creeping back into the old prison cells of our favorite sins. We keep thinking we should get a grip on ourselves and change our lives, but we can't."

Taming our sinful nature is a task beyond our own strength, akin to calming a storm with a whisper—and we know from Scripture that there is only One who can do that (Mark 4:36-41; Matt. 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25). We might wish to transform our flaws into virtues through sheer willpower, to cleanse our hearts and mend our ways. Yet, we find ourselves falling short. It's a humbling realization that leads us to the foot of the cross, where we lay down our burdens. In daily confession, it's as if our old selves are once again laid to rest, and through Jesus, we find renewal and grace for another day. Senkbeil continues, "When we deliberately take our sins out of the secret hiding places of our hearts and execute them by repentance and confession, it is nothing less than a renewal of the death we died in Baptism with Jesus and a new bestowal of the life we received there with Him."

Remembering our baptismal union with Christ's death is key—it's the moment our chains were broken, and we were set free from sin's grasp. Baptism makes our solemn observance of Lent a personal, living reality. Today I want you to see the link between your life today and the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ—as something much more than an event to be remembered or a nice religious idea. Today you don't just remember. This is not a time to reminisce over Jesus' death. Today where Jesus goes, you go. There's only

one cure for sin: drowning. You can either drown and die alone, or you can drown and die in Jesus. As Jesus is killed, you are killed; for *"the wages of sin is death"* (Rom. 6:23) As Jesus is shut up in the cold, dark finality of the tomb, there's a burial slab nearby for you.

And when Jesus walks out of the tomb and He leaves behind the shroud and graveclothes, and the putrid, filthy rags of our rebellion (Is.64:6), He doesn't emerge alone. When by the grace of God we drown and die in the waters of Baptism and then, in a miracle beyond our wildest hopes, *"just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father"* (Rom. 6:4) a nail-scarred hand reaches beneath the surface of the water and pulls us out, bearing us in His arms out from the darkness into the fresh dawn spreading light over the garden beyond the stone where what Paul called *"newness of life"* (Rom. 6:4) awaits. For *"if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him"* (Rom. 6:8) because *"the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Rom. 6:23).

It is indeed a matter of death and life. This is the essence of our daily life of faith: a daily dying to sin and a daily rising in Christ. Each confession, each act of repentance is the holy Spirit drawing us again towards the memory and present reality of rebirth. A matter of baptismal death and a life more abundant than we ever thought possible (John 10:10). Death happens once, but life—life is eternal.

***Baptized into Your name most holy,
O Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
I claim a place, though weak and lowly,
Among Your saints, Your chosen host.
Buried with Christ and dead to sin,
Your Spirit now shall live within.***

Family Update

What a rollercoaster of emotions the last few months have been! Immediately following the conclusion of the first semester, I underwent elective surgery that was believed would improve my overall health in the long run. But what was originally supposed to require a one- to two-day hospital stay, due to some unfortunate complications, extended to nearly a month over three more stays between late December and the end of February. That caused me to miss between three and four weeks of the second semester here at the Seminary. The faculty has been very gracious and supportive as I work to regain my strength. But it continues to be quite a task to catch up. I'm hoping to pull even again by the end of Reading Week. I appreciate your prayers as I continue to recover. I want to be at full strength when the time to serve comes very shortly.

Continuing our theme of hospitals and surgeries, Jill is recovering a surgical reconstruction of her right thumb joint which will hopefully relieve some chronic pain with which she's been dealing. But she came out of surgery with some loss of sensation that wasn't there previously. We're crossing our fingers that there won't be any lingering nerve damage, but it's too soon to say. Again, we'd be grateful for your prayers as she recovers.

After his first semester at IUPUI that held some disappointment with the program he was enrolled in, Nathan decided to take a gap year, work full time, and then reassess how he'd like to proceed. He's got a fantastic job in customer service with Chick-fil-A and we're proud of how hard he's working and the maturity he's shown in all of the decisions he's made. Before long, his racing program will resume; he's expanded to a more extensive regional schedule this year. He loves it so much and is in the basement tinkering with his kart's chassis and parts many evenings after work.

Faith has had her best year since we've been in St. Louis. Maybe it's getting out of middle school, the changed school environment, or the new friends she's

made, but she's a different young woman this year. She enjoyed performing in the ensemble for her school's musical, "Sweeney Todd." I missed it during my hospital stays (sad face), but Jill tells me that she did a fantastic job. When she's not in school, you'll find her on the phone with friends, snuggling with her cat, or singing at the top of her lungs. (I don't think she knows we can hear her!) Keep her in your prayers. More than anyone else, the changes ahead of us will be the hardest for her. Just as things have started to click for her...she'll be back at square one.

So here we are—Call Day looms large on our horizon. As I type this, we're ticking down: 41 days, 23 hours, 34 minutes, and 24 seconds until the big service. But hey, who's keeping track, right? Honestly, we're all a bit jittery about where this road will lead. Sure I could give you the whole "let go and let God" piety, but let's be real. Surrendering control over our future isn't always a walk in the park. We've been wired our whole lives to gather intel, crunch data, and make sensible decisions. (Okay, maybe I'm not the best at that, but I give it my best shot!). For the first time ever, we're just waiting to be informed. And boy, are we feeling the emotions! Excitement? Check. Terror? Double-check. Nervous jitters? Oh, you bet. Add in a dash of excitement and a dollop of overwhelmed. Mix it all up and you've got what we're feeling, depending on the hour you catch us. But here's the beautiful part: God's been the ultimate GPS all along. He's had our coordinates dialed in, destination set, and route mapped out. As the old Georg Neumark hymn reminds us:

***Be patient and await His leisure
In cheerful hope, with heart content
To take whate'er thy Father's pleasure
And His discerning love hath sent,
Nor doubt our inmost wants are known
To Him who chose us for His own.***