

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What's the most valuable piece of jewelry you own? For the women, I'm assuming you can think of at least a few different pieces you might value. And for husbands, usually it's whatever your wife says. But for a lot of fans, a piece of jewelry that they might hope to get is that coveted championship ring, maybe even a Super Bowl ring.

Not to be crass, but I want to compare Baptism to a Super Bowl ring. Luther says, Baptism is the greatest jewel we have. And today I want to compare it to a championship ring, a Super Bowl ring, to help us understand baptism just a little bit better.

Imagine for a second that the Vikings finally win that Super Bowl. And as part of that celebration, they give out one Super Bowl ring to a fortunate fan that they select for free. And you're the fan that's chosen. How many people would you tell? How often would you talk about it? Wouldn't you have pictures of it and tell the story of receiving that call from the Vikings' front office?

Baptism is an even greater thing than that. But because a lot of us don't remember it, we sometimes gloss over it. We pass too quickly by it. And so today I want to slow down and remember what baptism is and what it does for us.

That championship ring—the team had to earn it. They had to actually win four games in a row to get to the culmination of their season. And because they won, you can wear it. This is what our Gospel reading teaches us.

Why is Jesus baptized? John the Baptist recognizes that Jesus doesn't need to be baptized. If anything, John the Baptist should be the one who is baptized by Jesus. Jesus, God in the flesh, lives a perfect life. And so He doesn't need a baptism of repentance. He doesn't have anything to repent from.

But still, Jesus tells John this must be done to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus takes the place of sinners. For who needs to repent but sinners? And so the washing of baptism by John the Baptist for repentance is done by sinners. But Jesus takes the place of sinners so that sinners might dwell in the kingdom of God.

Christ enters the sinner's place by being baptized by John. And this is an anticipation, an awaiting of the cross and an empty tomb, which is the center of the Christian faith. Now, in the baptism, Christ takes the sinner's place. And then, on the cross, in an even greater way, He takes on the death that we deserve.

He takes the place of a criminal, though He is innocent, though He has done no wrong. And Pilate tries to acquit Him, to not go through with it. But he listens to the people to please them. And so the Lord of life dies a sinner's death.

And on the third day, Jesus rises again, defeating death, swallowing it up whole, crushing the serpent's head. Christ declares His victory. And so, out of the cross and empty tomb flows baptism—Christian baptism—conferring the salvation that Jesus achieved for us.

And so God places His name upon us. Just like that team. They truly had to practice. They had to suffer injuries. Fight the good fight of football, get the first down, get the touchdown, and by their victory you wear that ring. How much greater then is baptism, where Christ dies for you and wins victory for you. And then He gives it to you.

But what you have in baptism is infinitively more valuable, more precious. And so we ask three questions about baptism. What is it? What benefits does it give? And who receives it for benefit?

That ring is the declaration of the team's victory. It's their symbol of all they fought for and achieved. And baptism is where God's Word is used with water to place God's name upon His beloved children. It's not just a symbol of our faith. It gives faith. It kills the old Adam in us and makes us alive in faith and joy.

The old Adam, our sin, is put to death, and God gives us life. This treasure is greater and nobler than heaven and earth. God uses His Word and simple water to mark you as a redeemed and beloved child of God.

And what benefits does baptism give? As I've said, life and faith. But as Luther says, the simplest way to put it—the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism—is that it saves.

A ring won in a Super Bowl might give you some earthly pleasure, some fond memories, maybe some bragging rights. But baptism gives something real and of God. To be saved is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, and to enter into Christ's kingdom, and to live with Him forever.

Where God's name is, there must also be life and salvation. It is a washing of regeneration. Water and God's Word saves—not by any human power, but because God says so. Because God loves you, He claims you as His child and brings you into His family. What a beautiful gift.

And so, who benefits truly from baptism? Well, when we look at that Super Bowl ring one last time, who benefits from receiving it? At this point, there should probably be some of you who don't care about football. And you say, why is he talking about this ring? You probably would not receive that ring in good favor. You'd see it as a piece of metal that doesn't have much worth. So for you, that ring would not be valuable.

Like that, baptism is only beneficial to those who have faith. If a child is baptized, but never again hears the Word of God, their faith is choked out. And even though they have been baptized, they lose their faith. And it is of no benefit to them.

But where God's Word is, faith enters. And so we here are the truly beneficiaries of baptism. For we continue in faith, to continue to hear God's Word and receive His gifts in all blessedness. Baptism is not a work that we do, but it is a treasure that God gives us, and faith grasps onto it.

My favorite image is of that of a young child. If you put your finger in their hand, what can they do but grasp it? God gives it to us, and faith grasps onto it.

We may have our doubts, our struggles, our fears, and even tears. Lord, why has this happened? Lord, what must I do? Lord, am I truly saved? And faith can grasp onto baptism. I am a baptized child of God. I am saved. God's own child, I proudly say it. I have been baptized into Christ.

This is one of my favorite hymns for any dark night, any time of sorrow and doubt. I don't look to my own strength, but I can look to God and His gift in baptism. To remember that He has placed His name on me. He has claimed me as His child. And God's Word is sure.

Baptism allows us to draw strength from it and comfort when our sins or consciences try to oppress or torment us. And Luther so beautifully says, but I am baptized because God's Word is there. And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.

No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism. For through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire.

And so my hope and prayer for you today is that you see baptism as the beautiful, holy gift that it is. And that you claim it as your own. That God's Word may ever be present in and around you. That you may hear it and receive it with full joy. And I pray that you see how much more valuable it is than any Super Bowl ring.

You have something far, far greater in baptism. And that God's Word is in you. And you cling to His promises in all times of trial and tribulation. For we heard in Romans, we have been buried with Christ, and just as Christ has been raised from the dead, we too will be raised.

This is our great hope and promise in baptism. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Please rise for the offertory. Amen.