

- Let us pray the prayer for illumination. Open our hearts and minds, oh God, by the power of Your Holy Spirit so that as the word is read and proclaimed we may hear Your word, remember our baptism, and be thankful. Amen. The first lesson is from the gospel, according to Saint Luke. The fourth chapter. When he came to Nazareth where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. This is the word of the Lord.

- I remember casually remarking to my mother that of all the courses that I was subjected to in high school, only one had served me everyday of my life. Of only one of those courses could it be said that my life would be different had I not taken it. That course was typing. (audience laughing) And I really mean that. But then my mother said, "Well then you should be glad that I made you take it." "What?" "Yes? "You hated it, you had no aptitude for it, "you wanted to drop it, but I said no, "we paid the \$25, you're going to stay in typing. "You should thank me." Isn't that curious that somehow I managed to forget that my typing was not my choice. It wasn't my personal achievement. It was a gift. It was something that was decided for me, rather than by me. I don't think we Americans enjoy thinking of ourselves that way. All we like to think that we are captains of our fate, masters of our souls. I am what I decide. I am who I choose to be. I am self-fabricated. But in our more honest moments, like the one I had with my mother, we are forced to admit that our lives and often the very best part of our lives, are mostly gifts. A sum of decisions made for us, rather than by us. So there was that day when Jesus turned to his disciples in John 5 and said "Remember, you didn't choose me. "I chose you. "That you should go." I say this because in just a few moments we are going to engage in a very unnatural act. We're going to bring forward a number of people, among them a group of infants, and we're gonna say some words over them, we're going to douse them with water, and we're going to make them Christian. And in our cultural context that is odd. Most of us are like the old man who was asked, "Do you believe in infant baptism?" He said, "Believe in it, hell, I've seen it." (audience laughing) Well live, right here in our sanctuary today, you are going to see baptism, including infant baptism. And that really goes against the grain of the way we are trained to construe our lives. I suppose that most of the sanctioned Christianity is mainly something that we have decided. You can hear this in the way people sometimes talk. "Since I gave my life to Christ. "Since I decided to follow Jesus. "Since I took Jesus as my personal savior." If you notice in today's gospel that Marilyn has read, Jesus goes to his hometown synagogue. They don't say to Jesus, "Well this is student recognition Sunday, "how has it been for you in college, "could you share with us some of your personal, "spiritual experiences?" No they do what we do, they say, "Here's the book, read from it." This is something that comes to us, rather than from within us. There's none of this faith that is self-derived. Somebody had to tell you the story of Jesus. Somebody had to live that faith before you as exemplar. We Christians have got a word for that, grace. Grace means gift. I know that's why I am a

Christian. I might like to tell you I'm a Christian because I did a study of all the world's great religions, comparing their ethical systems, their theological stances, and I decided that Christianity is superior, and therefore, I decided to be a Christian. But no. I'm here because I was put here. When I was about six months old, on a Sunday afternoon, after a big dinner, they gathered in my grandmother's living room and they brought out this silver bowl, filled it with water, and this preacher named Forrester put water on my head and told me I was Christian. I don't necessarily think that's the way baptism ought to take place, but whatever liturgical reservations you may have about the mode of my baptism, you at least have to admit it worked. (audience laughing) I'm still here. We call it grace. Christians believe that we are Christians, not primarily because of something that we do, or something that we think, or we feel, but because of something that God, in Jesus Christ, has done. It's something done to us, rather than by us. We call it grace. Tertullian, one of the crabbiest people in the early church, once said in a treatise, "You don't get Christians out of people's loins." Something I would never say in a sermon. You don't get Christians out of people's loins. You get them out of the waters of the baptismal fount. Christians are not born, they are made. Nobody is a Christian naturally. It's nothing innate. You have to make Christians. This faith has to be told to you, given to you, lived before you. It's a gift. Christianity is not primarily a matter of closing your eyes, sitting under a tree, digging down deep for some spiritually uplifting comments. It's a story that's laid over your life that makes you who you are. Now what I'm saying is that in a few moments, when we baptize these babies in their infancy, in their dependency and neediness, they look a lot like you look, not just in infancy, but throughout your life so far as your relationship to God is concerned. There's nobody here that's ever gonna get so smart, so faithful, so adept at discipleship, that you will be able to do it for yourself. We're always helpless, needy, dependent infants, so far as our relationship to God. We're just like a babe in its mothers arms. Our baptism is therefore a sign, a signal, among other things, that God loves us enough to do what we can't do for ourselves. As Paul put it, Jesus Christ died to save who? Sinners. In Jesus Christ, we sinners, inept as we are, we didn't choose him, he said I chose you. And it is this God-actedness of baptism, of the whole Christian life, that I think is why Luther would talk about baptism as the Christian's great comfort. There's nothing very comforting about being told that you are related to God on the basis of how you behave, and keeping your slate clean, and being perfect. Luther said baptism is a reminder though that God helps us helpless ones in ways that we cannot help ourselves, therefore Luther says, "In times of great doubt and distress, "when you are wandering, "when you are uncertain about who you are "and where you're headed, "touch your forehead where you were baptized, "repeat the words, baptizatus sum." I am baptized. And this is great comfort in life and in death. Baptism is a sure sign that the same God that has loved you and worked at you throughout your life will continue to work with you and draw you in death, this God will bring you home. This is comfort because I don't know about you, but I don't always think like a Christian. I don't always feel like a Christian and if you've ever been in close proximity to me you know that I don't always act like a Christian, but that is not the basis of my relationship to Jesus Christ. That relationship is not based on me and my character, but on the character of a God that just loves to save sinners and reach out to the helpless and to embrace the infants. So, if you're ever having trouble being a Christian just touch your forehead, remember your baptism, and remember you're a Christian because here, we told you so. In her wonderful autobiography, *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard tells about a story, I think about the persistence of baptism. Annie Dillard was a smart young thing. By age 16 she had read all the books in her branch of the Pittsburgh Public Library, including Nietzsche. And so she decided at age 16 that this Christianity stuff was a bunch of hooey, so, one day, she made an appointment with the kindly, old assistant

pastor at Shady Side Presbyterian Church and she went down there and she said, "I want my name removed from the roll of this church. "I'm no longer a Christian. "I no longer believe any of this stuff. "I want my name removed." The old pastor said, "Okay." She said, "Uh, you're not gonna try to argue me into it or something?" He said, "Oh no, you're a lot smarter than I, "and if I could argue you into it, "I'm sure you could argue yourself out of it, okay." So she said, "So that's all it is? "I'm no longer a Christian?" And he said, "Well I said that your name "is now off the roll of the church, "I don't know about the rest." She said, "Well wait a minute. "I can do what I decide to do." And he said, "Oh well everybody thinks that at 16, "but we'll just have to see, won't we?" She said she walked out, finding the response of the preacher strange. She walked out of his office, she was walking down the hall, she heard the old man say to himself, "She'll be back." She said she wheeled around, she stormed back in that office and she said, "What did you say?" And he said, "Oh, I just said that I suppose "you'll probably be back." And she said, "No I won't. "This is my life and I'll do what I want to do. "I'm not gonna be back." And he said, "Well I know how you feel about these things, "but who knows how God feels about these things." She said she stormed out it made her so mad. She said, "As I write this I'm 45 years old. "Through a circuitous path, I'm in this faith, I'm back." Ah, remember your baptism and be thankful. Amen.