

Please open your Bible to 1 John chapter 3, and follow along as I read verses 1-10. I'll be reading from the New International Version.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.<sup>1</sup>

The battle plan, named Operation Overlord, called for the largest amphibious assault in the history of warfare. The operation was designed to begin the long and arduous process of liberating occupied Europe from Nazi forces. In the early morning hours of June 6, 1944, tens of thousands of American, British, and Canadian soldiers—backed by paratroopers, bombers and warships—stormed a 50-mile stretch of beach in Normandy, France.

The cost would be astonishingly high. Thousands of allied troops would lose their lives on the very first day of the operation, and thousands more would die in the weeks and months to come. But because of their sacrifice, what began on D-Day would end on V-E Day—Victory in Europe. An entire continent had been reclaimed, its people liberated, rescued from the clutches of an evil and powerful regime.

This will probably sound strange to you, but sometimes, Christmas makes me think of D-Day. I realize that for most people the thought of Christmas doesn't usually conjure up images from the opening scenes of the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. But the biblical storyline shows us that Advent—the coming of God into this world in the flesh-and-blood person of Jesus Christ—was in fact a spiritual act of war.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:1-10 (NIV)

This may not seem to mesh very well with tidings of peace on earth, or the thought of a harmless little baby lying in a manger, sleeping in heavenly peace. But observe the plotline of the Bible, and you will see that Christmas is God's invasion of enemy-occupied territory. Think of it: King Herod scours the countryside to kill the newborn Christ child, whose family escapes to Egypt to avoid the tyrant's jealous wrath.<sup>2</sup> Simeon, an elderly Jew, takes the baby Jesus into his arms and prophesies of hearts being pierced with swords.<sup>3</sup>

And in the book of Revelation, we find a dragon pursuing a woman and the male child she had given birth to, in an effort to devour the child.<sup>4</sup> Then, enraged dragon goes off to make war against God's people. Commenting on this passage, author John Eldredge suggests that every nativity scene should include a dragon.

So as we consider these parts of the Christmas story plotline, we see that the battle lines are drawn as light invades the darkness. Why did God become a human being in Christ? What was the reason for the incarnation, as theologians call it? In other words, why Christmas? Our passage for today gives this answer in verse 8:

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, in Hebrews 2 the Bible says:

Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.<sup>6</sup>

In the Story of stories— God's Story— Christmas is like D-Day. Christmas marked the launch of God's great rescue operation to reclaim his creation and to liberate its inhabitants from the powerful clutches of an evil usurper.

And yet, God's method of warfare was anything but conventional. He didn't storm earth's beaches with angel armies. He came in person, humbly, born as a baby in a room that doubled as animal shelter. He was born to a poor teenage mom, without royal fanfare (apart from an angelic announcement to handful of lowly, workaday shepherds).

And yet he would wage war on death itself, overpowering it by first allowing it to overpower him. Through his cross and resurrection, Jesus broke the devil's power; he struck the decisive blow that will inevitably lead to the utter unravelling of all of the devil's work. In doing this, Jesus made possible our own liberation from sin and death, and through his Spirit, he enables us to become like him, and empowers us to join him in his ongoing mission of undoing the devil's work in this world.

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<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 2

<sup>3</sup> See Luke 2:25-35

<sup>4</sup> See Revelation 12

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 3:8b (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 2:14-15 (NLT)

Let's do a deeper dive into what that means and why it's important. In the time that remains, we're going to explore three consequences of Jesus' coming as Conqueror of the devil and his work. The first consequence is:

## 1. The privilege of belonging to God's family.

Verse 1 of our passage says:

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are!"

Do you ever think about God's love for you? Many Christians might say, "Well, what's there to think about, really? *Of course* God loves me. Duh! That's his *job*. He's God."

But in the letter of 1 John, we're reminded that we really haven't understood how much God loves us if we live our lives consumed by fear, insecure, driven to compare and compete, always striving to prove our worth. But John says that the more you grasp how much God loves you, the more your life will be transformed from the inside out.

Just how great is the love that God the Father has lavished on us in Christ? Verse 1 says it is so great that we get to be called God's *children*. I never understood how profound a parent's love could be for his or her child until I became a parent myself. Even though our children can exasperate us, frustrate us and exhaust us, we still love them because they're our kids!

If you're a parent and are given a choice between losing your home, your job, your health, your life—and losing a child—you wouldn't even have to think about it, because that's how much you love your kids. And so, when John wants to explain how much God loves us, he says that the God of the universe calls you his child. And God doesn't just *call* us his children in name only—the text says *that is what we really are!*

Is *everybody* a child of God? Well, not in the way John means it here. The Bible makes it clear that every human being is a precious *creation* of God, and every human being bears God's very image. But we only become God's *children* by receiving God's forgiving grace in Jesus Christ. At Christmas, we celebrate how God was born into a human family in the person of Jesus. The other side of that same coin is that if I receive Jesus, I can be born into God's family. Here's how John puts it in his gospel:

But to all who believed and accepted him he gave the right to become the children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.<sup>7</sup>

Who are God's children? Those who receive and accept him, and as a result, are born of God. God's children are those who are "born again", as Jesus put it— those who are born anew spiritually.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John 1:12-13 (NLT)

<sup>8</sup> See John 3:3

When I was born physically, I inherited certain characteristics from my earthly father: I'm tall and slender (although not as slender as I used to be); I *had* brown hair just like my dad used to have (although now there's a lot of "snow" on my "roof"); my posture is similar to my dad's— we carry ourselves in the same way.

I also inherited a sinful nature from my dad and mom, as we all do from our parents— a nature that loves sin and self rather than God and others. But 16 years after I was born physically, God took me back to the delivery room, in a manner of speaking, and I was born again— this time spiritually— when I embraced Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord. At that point, the Spirit of Jesus came into my life, and I inherited and began the lifelong process of growing to reflect the character not of my earthly father, but of God, my heavenly Father.

Being born into God's family not only changes my relationship with God as I become his child through Jesus; it also changes my relationship with the world. Verse 1 goes on to say:

The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.<sup>9</sup>

The privilege of belonging to God's family is the greatest privilege we could possibly receive, but doesn't translate into honour or high standing for us in the world. When John speaks of the world in this case, he's not speaking about the planet, but about a *perspective*— the perspective of anti-God hostility that's so prevalent in the prevailing culture. If the world is hostile to God, it's also hostile to those of us who have become God's children through Jesus.

That's because we're out of step with the world and its ways— at least we should be— because we have values, perspectives, and priorities that are set not by the prevailing culture, but rather by our Father in heaven. That's why Jesus says in John 15:

"If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first."<sup>10</sup>

As Christians, we are therefore called to live as faithful members of God's family behind enemy lines. If the Son of God appeared that first Christmas— God's D-Day— to begin the process of destroying the devil's work, then those of us who become members of God's family are called join our Lord in that ongoing mission.

How do we go about this? Well, among other things, we invite other people to become members of God's family— we invite them to become God's children through Jesus Christ. Part of the privilege of belonging to God's family, is to invite people who are estranged from God to come home to the Father, so they too can become his children.

"How do I do that?" you may be wondering. We've developed a handout to give you some practical ideas and tips about how to get started. The handout is called *Ten Best Practices for Sharing Your Faith*, and there will be free printed copies of this available at the welcome desk

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<sup>9</sup> 1 John 3:1b (NIV)

<sup>10</sup> John 15:18 (NLT)

after service. Please help yourselves to those. Alternatively, you can find a downloadable version at [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/joy](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/joy).

Let's move on to the second consequence of Jesus' coming to conquer the devil's works, and that is:

## 2. The promise of belonging to God's family.

In verse 2, John writes:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.<sup>11</sup>

When we embrace Jesus and his saving work, we become God's kids, but we are not yet fully grown; we still have a lot of developing left to do. We are not yet what we one day will become.

The word Advent means "coming" or "arrival". During the season of Advent, we remember Jesus' first coming at Christmas, and we also anticipate his second coming, that matchless day when he will return to earth to set the whole world right, and reign forevermore. John is saying that when Jesus appears at his Second Advent, every member of God's family will be transformed, becoming just like the risen Jesus.

At the heart of the story of the Bible is the fact that God created and is now redeeming human beings to be perfect reflections of himself. In Genesis, God creates people in his own image. He creates human beings to be the creatures who are most like him— who think like God, who love like God, who act on God's behalf to take care of God's world. Of all the wonderful creatures God has made, we are meant to be the ones that God sees himself in— his glorious family likeness.

But when Adam and Eve— the parents of our human race— succumbed to the devil's lies and rebelled against the Creator, the image of God in humanity became terribly warped. In many respects, people became the creatures most *unlike* God— filled with envy, hatred, deceit, and radical selfishness.

But in his lavish love and grace, God sends Jesus who's called *the Second Adam* to recover what the first Adam lost. God sends Jesus to undo the work of that lying serpent, the devil, and to restore human beings to our original purpose of perfectly reflecting the image and likeness of the heavenly Father, and of his Son, Jesus. With this in mind, the Apostle Paul wrote:

For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn-among many brothers and sisters.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 1 John 3:2 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> Romans 8:29 (NLT)

In other words, Jesus is the first of a new kind of human being. He perfectly reflects the image and character of God. That's why he said, "To see me is to see the Father."<sup>13</sup> And Jesus is the first of many brothers and sisters who will one day also perfectly reflect God the Father's image and character. God is in the process of making us all like Jesus—to think like Jesus thinks, to act like Jesus acts, to love like Jesus loves. That's God's agenda for you and me.

God is constantly at work to make us like Jesus, and that process will be completed when we see Jesus face to face. That's very encouraging news! Do you know why? Because it means that our bad habits, shortcomings, and struggles with sin *are not terminal*. They do not get the last word in our lives. When the risen Christ appears at the end of history, we shall be made fully like him, forever. That's the wonderful, hope-filled promise of belonging to God's family.

And this leads to the third consequence of the fact that Jesus came into this world as the conqueror of the devil and his work—that our lives may increasingly show forth:

### **3. The proof of belonging to God's family.**

How can I know if I've really been born of God? How can I tell whether God's really my Father?

Here's where a little background about the letter of 1 John can give us some clarity. John wrote this letter in response to some false teachings that were gaining traction in the churches of his day, as Pastors Jeremy and Andrew have talked about in the recent weeks of this series.

One of these false teachings stressed that only those with access to a special form of secret knowledge could know God. This group, called the *Gnostics*, claimed to be the keepers of this secret knowledge, and were trying to convince church members to follow them in order to gain this special knowledge.

At the same time, Greek mystery religions were flourishing, and those religions emphasized that God could only be known through emotional experience. So, on the one hand, you have the Gnostics saying God is a subject to be mastered through having the right knowledge. And on the other hand, you have the Greek mystery religions stressing that God is a feeling to be experienced.

Things aren't much different today, because there are still those who stress that the more information you have about God, the better you'll know him. And there are still those who stress that the more you experience certain feelings associated with God, the better you'll know him.

Now John would certainly agree that we need to have the right information about God. And John would certainly agree that we need to be fully engaged with God emotionally. But John would never agree that God is *merely* a subject to be mastered, or a feeling to be experienced.

John will go on to make it very clear in our passage that God is a master to be obeyed. When the God and Father of Jesus Christ affects not only your intellect and emotions, but also your

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<sup>13</sup> See John 14:9 (MSG)

*behaviour*— your actions, your integrity, the way you relate to other people, your lifestyle— *that* is a sign you have been born of God; *that* is a sign you are God's child and belong to his family.

Specifically, John teaches that as a true child of God, your relationship with sin changes. In verse 3 John writes:

All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. <sup>14</sup>

What hope? The hope of becoming like Jesus when he comes again, as we saw in verse 2.

Those who look forward to fully becoming like Christ when he returns open their lives to the purifying power of God right here, right now. They purify themselves as Jesus is pure, says the text. They go to war against sin in their lives. John continues in verse 4:

Everyone who sins breaks the law. In fact, sin is lawlessness. <sup>15</sup>

John defines sin as lawlessness— it's living without boundaries, defying God's authority, denying God's values and commands. The lawless person says, "No one has the right to tell me how to live— *except me*." Lawlessness is doing whatever I want regardless of what God or others have to say about it. That's the essence of sin—it's not just doing the wrong thing— it's a way of living that rejects God's authority. John continues in verses 5 and following:

But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. <sup>16</sup>

Those verses have come across as pretty scary to some Christians. When we take an honest look at our lives, and then read the words, "No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him," we may feel that our standing with God is on very shaky ground. You may think to yourself, "I sin multiple times a day! Does this mean that I'm not a true Christian, that I'm not a true child of God after all?"

Let me assure you: John is *not* saying that the proof of being a child of God is a life of sinless perfection. To the contrary, 1 John chapter 1, which Pastor Andrew taught on last Sunday, says:

If we claim we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. <sup>17</sup>

Clearly, John would not say this if he expected sinless perfection of believers. He even repeats himself in verse 10, saying:

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<sup>14</sup> 1 John 3:3b (NIV)

<sup>15</sup> 1 John 3:4 (NIV)

<sup>16</sup> 1 John 3:5-7 (NIV)

<sup>17</sup> 1 John 1:8-9 (NIV)

If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the righteous one. (1:10-2:1).<sup>18</sup>

And all God's people said, *Whew!*

If John has been clear about the fact that every Christian sins, what does he mean when he says that no one who lives in Jesus keeps on sinning? The answer is found in the Greek verb tense, which refers to continual, habitual action. It's about the operating system we run on. John is saying no true member of the family of God continues over the long haul to live with unchecked, unchallenged sin as their default way of life.

Indeed, our passage says in verse 5 that Jesus appeared that he might take away our sins. Sin *is* the devil's work, and as we've seen, Jesus has invaded earth to destroy the devil's work. Therefore, if you're truly walking with Jesus, your relationship to sin will change. If you're truly walking with Jesus, then degree by degree, you'll start to grow in righteousness in your day-to-day living, and in the way you relate to others.

John's point is that if you think you know Jesus, but your relationship to sin remains fundamentally unchanged, you may want to reconsider whether or not you really know Jesus. Anyone can claim to know God. Anyone can say they're a Christian. But John continues in verse 8:

The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning [unchecked as their autopilot way of life] because they have been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.<sup>19</sup>

Those who belong to God's family, those who are the children of God, have God's seed in them, says John. Carrot seeds bring forth what? Carrots. Watermelon seeds bring forth what? Watermelons. Apple seeds will bring forth what? Apple trees.

And as Jesus says, a tree is known by its fruit.<sup>20</sup> The surest proof that you bought an apple tree at the nursery is not the tag that says it's an apple tree, but the fact that it bears apples! Those who are truly God's children have God's seed in them. God's seed brings forth what? Family likeness. Godliness. Christlikeness. Righteousness. One thing God's seed will not bring forth in our lives is ongoing, unchecked patterns of sin and lawlessness as our default way of life.

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<sup>18</sup> 1 John 1:10 – 2:1 (NIV)

<sup>19</sup> 1 John 3:8-10 (NIV)

<sup>20</sup> See Luke 6:43-45



Now keep in mind that the seed of righteousness often grows gradually. It's hard to see seeds grow. It can take time. But if the seed of God is in you, it will change your relationship with sin, and will begin to bring forth the fruit of righteousness in your life.

Before I became a Christian, I was a bigtime liar. It just came naturally to me. If it helped me get out of trouble, if it served my purposes in any way, I wouldn't even think twice about lying—to my parents, my teachers, my friends. One of the things I did most was make up stories to impress my peers. I would fabricate tales about things I did or I would embellish the truth of what happened to make myself look better or to get laughs and attention from others. Sometimes I even came to believe my own lies! Yet another form of dishonesty in my pre-Christian life is that I would often cheat on tests in school.

But then I became a Christian when I was 16 years old, still in high school. And off to university I went not long thereafter—a Christian university. In my first-year psychology class, what do you think I did? Well, I didn't study enough, for starters. And so, I decided I would write some helpful notes on the edge of my notebook and place it underneath my seat sticking out just enough so I could see it during the exam. In other words, I cheated.

I sinned, even though I had become a Christian. But this time, the difference was that I found myself very uncomfortable with the fact that I had done so. The Spirit of Jesus had taken up residence in my heart, you see, and Jesus had come to destroy the devil's work in me. I now had God's seed in me, and what I had done was contrary to who I had become as God's child. I could have cheated before I became a Christian without ever giving it a second thought, but now the Spirit of Jesus brought forth in my life a little thing called conviction. Sin used to come naturally, almost effortlessly, for me. Now it was unnatural, so that when I sinned, I felt conflicted. I was conscious of sin in a way that I never had been before, because Jesus had made me into a new person.

I still struggle with sin in many ways, and need to confess my sins to God daily. Which is also a part of the way your relationship changes with sin when you've truly been born of God. When I sin, I don't only feel conflicted inside because it's not who I am anymore. Sin puts a damper on my relationship with Jesus, and causes me to feel out of sorts. So I find myself compelled to run back to God, confess my sin, receive his forgiveness and make our relationship right again, in line with what Pastor Andrew spoke about last week. As I keep returning to God, gradually, slowly—and sometimes painfully—a little bit more of Jesus' character gets formed in me each year.

Dynamics like this in our lives are proof that we belong to God's family—that we've truly been born of God. If you struggle with sin, it's not a sign that you *aren't* a child of God—it's a sign that you *are*. Because if you weren't born of God, you wouldn't struggle with sin to speak of—it would more or less flow unhindered and unopposed in your life. Your struggle with sin—although struggling isn't fun—is actually *a sign of the grace and presence and work of Christ in your life*, because he came to destroy the devil's works in this world and in our lives by taking away our sin—its penalty, its power, and ultimately its very presence in our lives.

When Mary was pregnant with Jesus, an angel appeared to Joseph saying:

“She will give birth to a Son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save the people from their sins.”<sup>21</sup>

Jesus doesn't just make the forgiveness of our sins possible, although he certainly does that. He also breaks the power of sin in our life, so it just becomes a question of walking with Jesus each day, and learning how to break the habits of sin that we've brought in from our old life, so that we can live an increasingly righteous life that glorifies God and blesses other people.

To close, I'd like to speak to two groups of people.

First, I want to speak to those of you who are believers, those who are followers of Jesus. In your own struggle with sin, I ask you to consider just how serious sin is— especially as we head into the New Year and our minds turn to new beginnings. Sin is so serious, that in order to deal with it, it took nothing less than God's D-Day invasion that first Christmas— nothing less than the entry of God's Son into this world in the flesh, to be born, to live, and to die in order to destroy the work of the devil, who was a sinner from the beginning.

God takes sin that seriously, that he would go to those lengths to address it. So to not take sin seriously— to tolerate its presence in our lives like it's no big deal— just does not compute. Is God telling you this morning it's time to wage war on sin in your life? Is there anyone you need to reach out to for support and guidance along these lines?

The best way to wage war on sin is to focus, to reflect, to meditate on, and to celebrate the lavish love God has for you in Christ. *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, John said in our passage today, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*

Yes, God take sin so seriously that he arranged the incarnation to deal with it. But why did he bother to do so? Because he loves us, and wanted to rescue us from sin, death, and the tyranny of the devil. Consider what your rescue from sin cost God, and realize that his love for you is infinitely greater than even the love an earthly parent has for his or her child. God would rather die than to lose you, my friend, and in Jesus he did. By reflecting on the Father's lavish love for you, sin's grip on your life will loosen, as you realize all you ever needed or wanted, you have in Jesus. Gaze upon the Father's love, and your life will increasingly reflect his family likeness!

The second group I want to address just before I close is those who aren't sure if they've been born of God. If you've heard the Bible teaching today, and aren't sure if you belong to God's family— aren't sure if you've become a child of God— and you're wondering about what to do about that— that is a sure sign that God's Spirit is working on you to draw you to Jesus.

I bring you back to John 1:12:

But to all who believed and accepted him, he gave the right to become the children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew 1:21

<sup>22</sup> John 1:12

Would you all bow with me please? I'd like to invite anyone who wishes to be spiritually reborn this morning to pray a prayer with me to believe and accept Jesus— a prayer to be born of God. I'm going to pray this a phrase at a time, and I'd like everyone in the house to repeat after me, phrase by phrase. If you want to give your life to Jesus at this time, simply make this prayer you pray it aloud after me, phrase by phrase:

Jesus, I believe you are the Son of God... that you came into this world... and died on the cross... to rescue me from sin and death... and to restore me to God the Father... I now choose to turn from sin and self-centeredness... and every part of my life that does not please you... I receive your forgiveness... and I ask you to take you rightful place in my heart... as Saviour and Lord... Come reign in my heart... fill me with your love and life... and help me to become a person who is truly loving... help me to become like you... Restore me, Jesus... live in me... love through me... Thank you, God... In Jesus' name, amen.

[www.cornerstonechurch.ca/baptism](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/baptism)

If you just prayed that prayer and gave your life to Jesus for the first time, you have become a child of God. And the way you follow up on and confirm that decision is to be baptized. Our next baptismal service is taking place on Sunday, January 21, and we would love to baptize you on that day. Please visit the webpage you see on the screen to learn about baptism, and for a form you can fill out to let us know of your interest in baptism.