

The Waters of Baptism

Matthew 28:19-20

01 02 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Introduction

I don't remember one of the most important moments of my life. Oh, I was there, but my memories come from second-hand stories told by my parents. The event occurred on a spring Sunday morning in 1958 at **Capitol View Methodist Church**. My mother delights in describing how I committed a major indiscretion in my diaper just before the big event. She was frantically cleaning and changing me as the last stanza of the hymn was sung.

Then my parents carried me to the front of the sanctuary. The Reverend L. B. (Lewis Bevel) Jones, Junior took me in his arms. He dipped into the font and scooped up a handful of water. As he sprinkled water on my head, he recited these ancient words: "*William Randolph, I baptize you in the name the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*" According to witnesses, I screamed during the entire proceedings!

I. The Power of Baptism

Something very important and powerful occurred in that moment at God's altar. A ritual 2,000 years old testified through word and deed that God was present in our lives. As cold water splashed on the warm head of a startled infant, time halted and a glimpse of the eternal gained. We participated in a mystery, a marvel, and a miracle in recognizing that squirming, crying baby was a child of God.

Someone might protest, "How can your **baptism** mean anything to you? You don't remember it at all!" Well, I don't remember anything about my birth, either, but January 17, 1958 is quite meaningful to me! My memories of high school graduation are fading like old photographs in the sunlight, but I still have the degree. I don't remember every moment of our marriage ceremony, but I stand before you convinced that I am still married!

Why is my baptism so important to me? Why did I have my own children baptized in turn? And why has the church emphasized the importance of baptism through the centuries? The answers to these questions are found 2,000 years ago in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Actually, the tale begins with a prophet named **John** whose nickname was "*the Baptist.*" He appeared in the wilderness of Israel, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. He was an old fashioned, seat kicking, hell fire, and brimstone preacher. His sermons were like fingernails screeching down a chalkboard. The people flooded into the River Jordan to receive the waters of baptism.

Then one day John saw **Jesus** walking into the waters for baptism. The Baptist protested to his cousin, "*I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?*" With mud oozing between his toes and sinners on every side, Jesus replied, "*Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*"

So John baptized Jesus in the River Jordan. The sinless, son of God received a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins! Here is a microcosm of the Incarnation. He became what

we are so that we might become what he is. And through the incarnation, birth, baptism, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we become sons and daughters of the heavenly King.

After his crucifixion and resurrection three years later, the risen Lord gathered his disciples on a Galilean mountainside and gave them the “**Great Commission**.” “*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*”

Christians through the centuries have remained faithful to this charge as one generation baptizes the next. When my parents brought me before God’s altar, I stood in a long line of saints who had come before me. In turn, Tracy and I had our children baptized. And by God’s grace, someday we will witness our children’s children baptized as well.

II. The Significance of Baptism

However, doing something just because our parents did it is not enough. Rituals done because of rote and habit become meaningless. One of the sacred phrases in church life is, “We’ve always done it that way!”

A **newlywed couple** was preparing its first Easter meal. The husband watched in bemusement as his bride prepared the baked ham. She carefully cut three inches off both ends of the ham before placing the remainder in the oven. Curious but cautious, he carefully asked, “Honey, why did you throw the two ends of the ham away?”

She frowned and answered, “I don’t know—that’s how my mom always did it.” So they called her mother who said, “Well, I don’t know, either. I learned to cook from your grandmother.” So they called grandma. After hearing the question, she laughed and said, “Oh, darling, I always cut both ends off because I didn’t have a big enough pan for a whole ham!”

I have little doubt that baptism is often practiced in the same fashion. We’re not sure why, but it’s what our parents and grandparents did. So we do it in turn.

When we first moved to West Point in 1995, I was driving up State Line Road on the Alabama side of the Chattahoochee River. I came to a **Railroad Crossing** sign, so I slowed to a stop. Then I crept forward a few feet. Then a few more. I have yet to come to a crossing! When I asked a native about the sign, he said, “Oh, yeah, the railroad used to come through there but they tore up the tracks twenty years ago!” But the sign remains!

Holy Baptism is a sign from God filled with rich meaning. It is one of the **sacraments** of the Christian faith. In the Protestant church, we celebrate two sacraments: **Holy Communion and Baptism**. Jesus instituted both of these sacraments. At the Last Supper, he told the disciples, “*Do this in remembrance of me.*” Then in the Great Commission, he said, “*Baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*” Both of these sacraments are also available to all Christians.

The classic definition of a sacrament is “*an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.*” The use of ordinary elements such as water, bread, and wine take on extraordinary meaning. The natural contains the supernatural. We see through space and time to catch a glimpse of the eternal.

The **Incarnation** was the greatest sacramental event of all. The Son of God came to earth as a man. In him, all the fullness of the deity dwelt bodily. The divine became human. If all this sounds rather mystical and mysterious, it is! We are attempting to describe the indescribable and put into words what is beyond all expression.

Some might scoff and dismiss the entire experience by saying, “Oh, why didn’t you just say so! What you mean is that a sacrament is *just* a **symbol**. The water came from the tap, the bread was bought at the bakery, and the “wine” was actually Welch’s grape juice.”

Saying the sacraments are *just* a symbol misses the entire point. Symbols hold great power. They both point to and participate in a reality greater than themselves.

The **American flag** is *just* a symbol, a creation of cloth, thread, and dye. Yet it stands for our history and heritage as United States’ citizens. The 50 stars on a blue background with thirteen alternating red and white stripes represents our nation. The flag evokes memories of Betsy Ross, Gettysburg, Iwo Jima, Apollo 11, 9-11, a flag draped coffin, and so much more.

A **wedding ring** is *just* a symbol, a circle of gold worn on the left hand. Yet in the marriage ceremony, the gold is invested with divine meaning. The minister holds the rings up and says, “*The wedding ring is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace signifying to all the uniting of this man and this woman in holy matrimony, through the Church of Jesus Christ our Lord.*”

The **cross** on the altar is *just* a symbol; but it signifies Christ’s sacrifice and God’s love.

III. **The Waters of Baptism**

Water is one of the most powerful symbols of the Christian faith. What does baptism mean? Methodist author, Bishop Will Willimon, responds, “*Baptism means everything that water means!*” Water is the essence of life. Three-quarters of the world is covered with water. Approximately 90% of our bodies is water. Water quenches our thirst and cleanses our bodies. It nurtures plants with rain. Harnessed by dams and dynamos, water provides power and light. The advent of new life is heralded by the breaking of water.

Another way to answer the question is to consider the different **modes** of baptism. People normally associate sprinkling of water with Methodist baptism. However, our tradition will baptize any of three ways: sprinkling, pouring, and immersion. Each mode has Scriptural and theological significance.

A. **Sprinkling**

The majority of the time we sprinkle water in baptism. In Old Testament times, God’s people gathered at the Tabernacle or Temple for worship. After the sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin, the priests would dip branches in the blood and sprinkle the people. It was a vivid sign of the sacrifice’s atonement covering the people’s sins. It also provided an opportunity to renew the covenant between God and Israel.

B. **Pouring**

The second means of baptism is pouring. After Christ’s ascension back to heaven, Acts 2 describes how the disciples gathered in the Upper Room, waiting as Jesus had commanded them. Suddenly, the room was filled with a sound like rushing wind and tongues like fire appeared

above the apostles' heads. God poured out the Holy Spirit upon the church. In Baptism, we recognize that God pours his Spirit and blessings upon his sons and daughters.

C. **Immersion**

The third mode of baptism is immersion when the person goes completely under water. In baptism, the old person dies and a new creation emerges from the waters. We share in Christ's death and resurrection as sin dies and new life is given.

Regardless of how baptism is done, we are initiated into God's family. We become children of God, and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. Something amazing and divine occurs when we are baptized.

IV. **For All People**

First and last, baptism speaks to us about God's grace and love. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Salvation is nothing we earn but a gift we receive. Baptism is an outward symbol of an inward transformation. The emphasis is always on God's action and grace.

Theologically, this is one of the reasons that the United Methodist Church practices **infant baptism**. This is a tradition that stretches back to the New Testament church. We recognize God's grace that is active and present in the child's life. We also anticipate a day when the child will accept for him or herself the vows that are made on its behalf at the altar by parents and congregation.

Do we believe that unbaptized babies are any less loved by God? Absolutely not! Each child is precious and loved by his heavenly Father.

Yet some protest, "But infants and children don't understand what is happening at baptism!" And my answer is: "So?" If full understanding is a prerequisite for baptism, then I reckon none of us will ever deserve to receive it. The truth is that we as adults have more in common with a squalling young'un in the preacher's arms than we might first imagine. None of us fully understand what God has done for us or the significance of the promises we make to God in turn. And all of us are just as helpless as an infant without God's saving grace.

When we baptize an **infant or child**, we celebrate God's grace present in the new life and anticipate the ways the Lord will be with the child in the days to come. We pray for a day when the child will accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

When we baptize a **teenager or adult**, we recognize God's grace in their life, and how they have responded by faith to God's salvation. They are believers initiated into the church.

For infant, child, teenager, and adult, baptism recognizes God's grace that has guarded them in the past, saved them in the present, and will go with them into the future. Baptism is not the journey's end, but the beginning of a long and wonderful pilgrimage.

Baptism is ultimately about grace. God has made the first move and offered his love in our lives. Baptism is primarily something the Lord does for us. And this is one of the reasons the church has traditionally not practiced **rebaptism**. Certainly we are capable and even inventive in breaking our baptismal promises made to God. But God never, ever breaks his promises to us.

Conclusion

On occasion, I have had the opportunity to officiate at **marriage renewal services** with couples celebrating a significant anniversary. I recall one couple who met in the sanctuary on their 50th anniversary and repeated their vows to one another. Months later I would recall their vows of “for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part” when the man laid in a hospital bed dying with his wife beside him.

My hunch is they better understood the meaning of those words on their 50th anniversary than they did as starry-eyed lovers on the day of their marriage. The decades helped them to more fully comprehend the significance of the promises they made to God and one another.

Today we gather to celebrate all that God has done in our lives. We also pause to be reminded of the promises made by us to God. Some remembered their baptismal vows from infancy and childhood when they were confirmed in the church. Others made their promises to God when they were baptized as believers in adulthood. All of us need opportunities to reaffirm our faith and renew our solemn covenant to follow God.

Baptismal Reaffirmation Service. (Hymnal # 50-52)