

SACRED CEREMONIES: BAPTISM

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Welcome time: We're going to talk today, not about something that is on our list, but the one thing from which thereafter all our lists are derived.

Sermon time: I once read about Annie Taylor, who inserted herself into an air-tight wooden barrel pressurized to 30 psi by a bicycle pump, and on October 24, 1901, became the first person to *survive* going over Niagara Falls. It kind of makes you wonder, doesn't it? How many had done this prior to her *without* surviving? And what makes a person wake up one day and have such a notion, much less entertain it? Did I mention that Annie was a 63 year old teacher and, from the looks of her photo, not a small lady?

Over the years since then, others have gone over in steel barrels, rubber balls, and even wrapped in inner-tubes, the most recent being in 1995. That fellow was doing it, by the way, a second time although this time around with a woman caterer friend of his.

Whatever you think of such escapades, those folks who did them were in one place before and in another after. They were on the same river, but in a different plane – river-wise and identity-wise. Same river, different level. Same river, different location. Today I want to work with you on water that you go into which brings one to a different plane. I want to speak to you about baptism.

I once had a friend named Mark Slobodnik. His family was from Russia. They immigrated. They got into a ship, got into the water, and got out on the same

earth, but in a different place. And it was a place that had a different story, an American democracy story. A capitalism story. It was a place with different words and different values. Mark's brother changed his name from Slobodnik to Slater to identify with his new place. Today I want to work with you on water that you go into which has you coming out in a different place, story, vocabulary, values...even a different name. I want to speak to you today about baptism.

As the old spiritual has it, I want to "wade in the water" with you.

We pray.

For January, we have been looking at some of our sacred ceremonies given to us in the Bible and practiced in the church. We've talked about ordination and the laying on of hands, weddings, the Lord's Supper, and now today about baptism.

Baptism has questions swirling around it, floating up in it – infant or adult?

A Lutheran and Baptist are having another argument over baptism, so the Lutheran asks, "If I'm in the water up to my knees, am I baptized?" "You are not!" the Baptist replies. "How about up to my waist, am I baptized then?" "You are NOT," the Baptist replies. "What if I'm in the water up to my eyebrows, am I baptized then?" asked the Lutheran. "No!" said the Baptist. The Lutheran replied, "Like I said, baptism is just a little water on the top of the head."

Sprinkling or dunking? Godparents or no? Once or do-overs? Dedication or baptism? I won't be able to address all the questions in the time we have. But let's start by looking at baptism in the Bible.

In the Bible, baptism is presented in different ways.¹ There's *John* the Baptist's baptism of repentance in preparation for the arrival of the Messianic kingdom. There's Jesus entering the water with John in identification with humanity and hearing his son-ship declared, seeing Holy Spirit descend – relationship with us, with God, with the Spirit. *Luke* keeps a kind of Texas two-step going between water and Holy Spirit. In Acts 8, the Samaritans get water baptism and then Spirit baptism. In Acts 10, Cornelius, it's the other way around – he and his get Spirit baptism and then water. But water and Spirit are associated.

Paul doesn't talk about the Spirit like that, but about union with Christ that we are in Christ. When he does mention baptism, it is as being like circumcision, identifying a clan relationship with God.

The author of Hebrews see the people of Israel passing from Egypt to the Promised Land via the Red Sea as baptism. He brings this up to say that baptism isn't a kind of spiritual rabbit's foot which makes people able to do whatever they want and experience immunity from God's rules or justice.

Peter doesn't refer to the Red Sea as an Old Testament baptism, but to the flood and Noah's ark. So there's a fair bit of variety around baptism.

But ... for all this, baptism is about something being altered, altering the landscape. When the Hebrew people exited Egypt, went through the Red Sea, the door

¹ It employs water and water is associated with creation (God making the seas), with judgment (Noah and the flood), with cleansing (Naaman, the leprous official washing in the Jordan), with justice (let it flow down like a mighty stream), with refreshment and sustaining (getting water from the Samaritan well). It might make us think of other Bible liquids like blood for covenant making and oil for anointing.

closed on what they were. Oh, habits and speech and a bunch of Egypt was still in them, and I don't imagine the topography on either side of the sea looks that much different from the other, but the door closed behind them and their inner landscape, their social landscape, their spiritual landscape was different. They had put on bumper stickers on their camels that said, "Beulah Land or Bust."

Here are five words that express what happened and what was different.

First, **renunciation**. Paul says in Romans 6:3, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him through baptism into his death." Water means life (like to plants). But it also means death (like in a flood). Baptism means we die to certain things.

In the early church, baptisms happened at dawn. Those being baptized would stand facing the darkness in the west, and then turn to the rising sun in the east. The turning of the back on the darkness was a renunciation. We ask in baptism, "Do you renounce evil?" Remember the word renunciation.

Second, **confession**. Paul says in Romans 10:8, "If you believe in your heart and confess with your lips, you will be saved." Not just believe. Not just confess. Something inwardly felt *and* outwardly expressed. And those in the books of Acts who believed and confessed were told to repent and be baptized. Believe *and* do something observable.

Those believers in the service at dawn did not simply turn their back to but they turned their face toward. They faced the sun and answered the

question, “Do you affirm your reliance upon God’s grace?” They said what they believed (“I need God’s grace.”). They did it out-loud.

If I loved someone and she said she loved me, but didn’t want to forsake all others, didn’t want get married, didn’t want to be seen with me, didn’t want to wear a ring, and have people know we were married, it’d all be a bit flimsy, wouldn’t it? She would have inward feelings, but not an outward confession.

You publically acknowledge, not only what you give up, but what you take on and with whom you are identified. Baptism is a *public* renunciation and a *public* confession.²

Third, **enfold**. Paul says in Ephesians 4, “There is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” The word “body” is the body of Christ, the group of believers.

When we are born physically, it is into a family, and it is the same when we are born spiritually.

Baptism is an initiation rite that one undergoes saying, “I believe what you believe, and I want to be a part of the team.” It is submission to and a joining of. Do you hear about the guy who wanted to join the NFL, but didn’t want to be on a team? It doesn’t work that way. And if he joined a team and at practice said, “My thing is soccer,” that wouldn’t work either. Just so we do not get baptized and not be a part of the community, and we do not get baptized and say that we do not adhere to the Christian faith and Christian work.

² Thus Presbyterians do not do private baptisms.

The person baptized in the early church with the rising sun was taken from where they were baptized outside the church immediately into the inside of the church. This signified that what they said in baptism is, “I join you in believing in Christ as risen Savior and Lord, and I want to join you in doing his work.” Many churches place the font at the door of the church signifying that when you pass through the water you become a part of the community within.

Fourth word: **intention**. Paul says in Galatians 3:27, “All of you who were baptized in Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” And then he goes on and talks about living an obedient and spirit-filled life.³ We put off and we have sights set on putting on Christ. That’s our plan.

I remember dropping off one of my sons at college. If he had entered the college, joined the student ranks, and then said, “I’m not going to classes; I’m not going to take on the knowledge and skills related to electrical engineering; I’m not going to grow as a person here,” you and I would wonder about what’s going on. Just so baptism expresses our intention to learn Christ and serve Christ in a serious and real way.

This is true even with children. It would be odd for parents to baptize a child, though they do it, and say, “I’m going to let my child decide for himself/herself about God.” There’s a truth to that but but but... couldn’t I wonder, “Will you let them decide between English and making up their own gibberish language? Will you let them decide

³ See also Romans 6:3-4, 11ff.

between manners or no manners? Will you let them decide about what makes good character? Whether to go to school or not? If we are going to share those values, those native inheritances that are ours, why would we not share the most important truths of all, those about Jesus Christ?" This is a matter of intention, whether by the person himself or herself, or by the family for them.

Did you know that the Apostle's Creed most likely was worked out initially for those being baptized, a statement of faith, them showing that they were already learning, memorizing, incorporating, articulating the faith they intended to hold and have hold them.

Fifth and finally, **promise**. It is not only the last word, but the first word. In Ezekiel 36, we are told that God "*will* sprinkle clean water upon you and you will be clean from all your unrighteousness." And, "*will* put my spirit within you." We, rightly, see baptism as us making a promise to God. But more importantly, baptism is God making a promise to us. His pledge to cleanse us with the blood of Christ and fill us with the Spirit of Christ if we will accept it.

We can promise because he first promised to us. We love God because he first loved us. In fact, we renounce sin because he first renounced it being in us. We confess him because he first confessed us. We enfold his community because his first enfolded us. We intend towards him because he first intended to us!

If you have been baptized, hold on to God himself making a promise to you.

Five words. I've sprinkled. I've dunked. I've done it in the river. I've done it in the sanctuary. I've done it for babies and I've done it for adults. But it is still five words.

I once witnessed a baptism at the edge of a Hindu village in India. The believers walked through the village singing and all the villagers joined the parade and came to a pond. There the believers were stood in the water and the pastor asked them, "You know in our time and place, that by doing this you may be ostracized? You may never find a spouse? You may actually be killed?" They nodded and these five words were there: renounce, confess, intend, promise, enfold.

Today, if you were baptized, remember you were, and remember your five words: renounce, confess, intend, promise, enfold.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.

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