

“And then what?”

What does your baptism mean to you?

That is a question that is sometimes posed to young people at the beginning of a confirmation class. Most often, young people sit blankly, hoping not to make eye contact with the person who asked. How would you respond?

For most Presbyterians, and I'd venture to guess, to most mainline Christians, baptism is probably not one of those things that we just don't think about much, nor does it mean much to us, except that it is supposed to be a happy moment. Because Presbyterians will baptize infants, we are often amused or intrigued by what a baby's response will be. I've heard lots and lots of stories about baptismal moments, and have participated in some of them personally. Most are characterized by spit-up, diaper incidents, screaming or wailing (often into lapel mics), mild to outright distraction, and perhaps even escaping toddlers.

We are amused by these antics and parents are embarrassed OR amused along with the rest of us, but seldom I'd guess, do we have a sense that the one being baptized is undergoing much more than a sweet little blessing that the church performs for the benefit of the family. In reality, the child is undergoing a profound initiation, a process of cleansing from sin, of entering into the death and resurrection of Christ, and of being received into a new community or family of faith. I'd venture to guess

that most of us don't understand that the baptism is a life-changing and transforming event with fundamental repercussions for the rest of the child's life.

We listen to the story of Jesus' baptism in much the same way, though he was a grown man when it occurred. It's a nice story of Jesus coming down to the river where John was baptizing with water for repentance. Jesus wants him to also baptize him, but John protests, having previously told his following that he [John] would be unworthy even to carry the sandals of the one coming after him, the Messiah. Recognizing that the Messiah has arrived, John wants to BE baptized instead of the one baptizing. So it's a lovely picture, a nice story of this servant of the Lord recognizing Jesus and his authority and stepping aside. It's a lovely picture of Jesus, insisting on submitting to John's baptism in order to fulfill all righteousness. And of course, the most wonderful picture of all is when the heavens were opened and Jesus saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and all the people gathered at the river that day heard a voice from heaven name Jesus as the wonderful, beloved Son.

But I wonder how many of us would be so quick to jump on the baptism wagon if we really took seriously this profound, life-changing, transformational sacrament. We might recall God's voice calling to Abraham about his beloved son. But even on Mt. Moriah, God stopped Abraham from offering his son. We hear in the gospels a foreshadowing of what God did not permit him to carry through, and yet what God's own Son ultimately would endure on the top of the mount called The Skull.

Our own baptismal liturgy draws on some rather disturbing Scripture, if the stories of the sacrifice of Father Abraham and God the Father aren't enough. We read in Romans 6:

Do you not know that all of you who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were baptized therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

...baptized into his death? ...by baptism into death? Goodness! Those are very startling and unsettling pictures for baptism, aren't they. Not only is death an unpleasant thing for us to think about, especially in our time when we try as hard as we can to remove it from our field of vision and make it as sterile as possible, but who wants to think about babies and death in the same breath? Or any of us and death, for that matter? And if we are talking about a death like Christ's, I'm guessing that sign-up sheet is going to be pretty short.

But let's stop for a moment and dissect this story and its place in Matthew's gospel. It might also be helpful to think in terms of parallels. As we look at the baptism of Jesus story, we start out with the knowledge that Jesus was seeking baptism "in order to fulfill all righteousness." We understand our baptism as that which makes possible our participation in that righteousness which Christ makes available to us. While most Presbyterians are not dunked in a baptistery or in the river, we use the water symbolically to indicate that we are washed of our unrighteousness, our sinfulness. As Christ died to take away our sinfulness, so do we participate in his death through our baptism, washed clean because he died. And in many ways, we

too can die to our sinful selves by giving up our selfishness, our need to have things our way, our need to control and hold on, our greed and desire for more, our willingness to hurt others or not think of others and their plight, no matter how great or small, and countless other ways we can give up our sinfulness. We can die to ourselves because Christ died for us.

But the passage from Romans also says that Christ was raised from the dead so we might walk in newness of life. What do you suppose “newness of life” looks like? We might imagine that life is good, easy. Babies have new life, as it were. They don’t have to do much, but seem pretty happy and content as long as all their needs are met. Maybe that’s what “new life” looks like. We have plenty to eat, lovely clothes to wear, a beautiful home, loving family members gathered around, someone to care for our details, plenty of time and money for exotic travels or our favorite hobbies, health and longevity, nothing to worry about.... I’m sure you could add to the list. But what do you suppose that newness looks like, in God’s eyes, from a Christ’s-eye view?

We really don’t know much about Jesus up to the time he was baptized in the Jordan. But we know quite a bit about him from that point on. We know that he came to show us what God’s love was like, to share that love with us. So what happened to him after he came up out of the water that day? We know that he immediately took off and went into the wilderness. Scripture doesn’t record that he took his knapsack or servants, or that people brought him provisions while he was there. In fact, it says that he fasted in the wilderness for 40 days and nights. [That’s where we came up with the season of Lent and the idea of giving up worldly

pleasures of some sort during that time. If Jesus did it, maybe we should to some degree too.] While there, Jesus was tempted to give up God's ways for greed, power, selfishness, and idolatry. These things are not just things which tempt us, but God in Christ understands our plight and allows us to enter into that righteousness over and over again, to put to death our sinfulness and walk in newness of life, forgiveness for our sinful ways.

So, what happened next? Freed then, from the ties to worldly power, Jesus returned to the news that John had been arrested. He left for Galilee and began his ministry. He started preaching by the Sea of Galilee, and began to gather folks around him to train for ministry. He spent a great deal of time with that band of somewhat faithful men, teaching them, leading by example, and sometimes, they even got it right. He stood on hillsides, in boats, on level ground, and preached God's good news. He preached and preached until he grew weary and had to go on retreat. He went from village to village and cared for God's people. He healed and blessed and taught some more. He didn't really care if he was making some of the rich and powerful folks upset, because he was on a mission from God. He loved the people. He gave himself away for them. He served others, until finally, the only thing he had left was his life, which he also gave for the people.

Suppose that's what newness of life is? Serving others? Giving ourselves to others? Dying to our wants and desires in order that others might also have life?

I've been listening to the presidential debates, and I've sure heard a lot of promises. Those are some of the most noble, giving, and caring folks on this planet, if we can

believe everything they're telling us. And in the world they're all promising us, everyone will be equal, everyone will have enough, everyone will have respect and dignity, no one will want because plans and programs will be set up to provide for everyone, and the wealth of some will be spread around to all! What a wonderful world! And if that would really happen, if that really worked, I'd have to say that the messianic age was being ushered in. Each of them has a slightly different way of arriving at the end, and of course, the end looks just a little different to each of them, but boy! Don't they all love us and care for us? So why is it that no election brings about these kinds of changes? Because of greed, and power, and selfishness, and idolatry. But newness of life enables us who have been baptized into Christ's death to see the new life ahead, to leave behind the ways of suffering and death, and to work for those who still suffer.

And because of Christ's ultimate death on the cross for our sins, Christ was raised from this life of death. Because of his death and resurrection, we are freed to live as though we had never lived before. We are freed to die as if there was no death, for in baptism, we die with Christ in a death like his so that we too might be raised with Christ in a resurrection like his. We don't have to fear death, for there is nothing in this life which can harm or take away the promise of eternal life in Christ. Nothing we can endure on this side of the grave will keep us from our new life in Christ.

Jesus was baptized for mission and ministry, service and sharing, for death to sin and new life in God. We were baptized for mission and ministry, service and sharing, for death to sin and new life in God. We are given fresh opportunities each week when we come to worship to enter again into the baptismal covenant with our

baptismal family, to confess those things which tempt us and make us stumble and fall, to receive again the forgiveness of God, being washed clean in the tomb of death so that we might rise to the new life that is given to us in Christ. Because we are baptized into the *very body of Christ*, we share with him in his Easter life...*newness* of life...life to give for others, *all* others, *any* others, because we are Christ's *very body*.

What does your baptism mean to you?

The waters of death and the fulfillment of righteousness.... How will you rise to new life this week? How will you live AS the new life, as Christ, to others? You have been baptized into Christ's death and given new life. Now what?