

Water-Washed and Spirit-Born

Mark 1:4-11

January 8, 2006

One of the most memorable baptisms at which I have officiated was several years ago when Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday. I was baptizing a family of three children, ranging in age from six weeks to four years. After the appropriate liturgy, I baptized Daniel, the four year old in cowboy boots. As I set him down after sprinkling the water on his head, he looked up at me, hands on hips, and demanded, "What was that all about?" "We baptized you, Daniel," I said. "What does that mean?" "It means God loves you." "Are you God?" "No, I'm not God." "Are you God's mother?" "No, I'm not God's mother. I'm one of God's children, just as you are one of God's children." "But I'm their child," said Daniel, pointing up at his parents. Seeking to hastily end that impromptu theological discussion in the midst of worship, I said, "Yes, Daniel, you are their child and you are God's child. And now we're going to baptize your sister!"

I learned from that experience early in my ministry not simply to offer instruction to parents about baptism, but also to offer instruction to the children who are being baptized, especially if they can talk!

When I explain baptism to children, we talk about water and the many ways in which we use water. We use water for cleansing, bathing, swimming, feeding plants and lawns, drinking. Our bodies cannot live without water. Plants cannot live without water. Water is essential to our physical survival. Water gives life.

Water is a symbol for God's love and grace. Like water, God's love and grace are essential to our spiritual survival. We cannot live abundantly or fully without love and grace. They come sprinkled in our lives in a multitude of ways. We frequently experience love and grace through the presence of other people in our lives: parents, grandparents, teachers, Sunday school teachers, friends, and our fellow Christians. Sometimes we know God's love and grace in a piece of music, an inspirational reading, a stunning picture of God's creation, a moment of silence. God showers us with love in a multitude of ways.

Baptism is the initiation into the family of God. That's why baptisms, except in the case of emergency, are performed within a public service of worship, so that the church, the family of God, can welcome and receive its new members. Baptism is an embrace by the Body of Christ.

Our service of baptism reminds us that through baptism we are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation. God has been at work in

the world and in human lives from the very beginning. The prayer of thanksgiving over the water reminds us of many times in which God has used water for salvation. “In the days of Noah you saved those on the ark through water....When you saw your people as slaves in Egypt, you led them to freedom through the sea. Their children you brought through the Jordan [River] to the land which you promised.”

Upon our baptism we wade into the waters of God’s saving grace. We step into the river of life and are swept up by the guiding currents of God’s Holy Spirit. We join the flow of people through the ages whose lives have been saved by God’s grace.

Although we Methodists tend to baptize by sprinkling, the imagery of full immersion of the body in a font or pool, river or lake is powerful. The quantity of water symbolizes the fact that in baptism we are stepping into a body of living water that is far larger than ourselves. The stream of faith is ancient, tried and true. We swim the river of faith with the saints of God, past, present, and future. We are not alone in this voyage. We sail with companions who are seeking love and learning to love.

In baptism we are given new birth through water. John the Baptizer makes it very clear that he offers baptism by water, a cleansing of sin, an opportunity to repent, to change the direction of one’s life. There are indeed sins of which we need to be purged, attitudes, feelings, opinions, judgments, behavior that need to be eliminated. We fall back into old habits and unhealthy patterns that are foreign to the ways of God. Baptism by water and the reaffirmation of our baptism offer us opportunities to experience new birth again and again and again. It offers us a new beginning, a fresh start, a new life.

Again the imagery of immersion lends power to this meaning of baptism. When a whole body is immersed in water, we have the sense of drowning to an old life, of being cleansed of impurities. When we arise out of the river, we are new people, washed and holy, given new birth and life. In the early days of the church, as Christians rose up out of the baptismal waters, they were clothed in new white robes symbolizing their new life in Christ. This is what Jesus means when he calls disciples to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection, death to life without God and resurrection to life with God.

In baptism we are given new birth through the Spirit. While John knows that his baptism is only by water, he points toward the baptism that Jesus will offer, baptism by the Holy Spirit. Water baptism may be cleansing, but Spirit baptism is purifying and will set your life on fire. The gift of God’s Spirit changes us from inside out. Baptism with the Holy

Spirit suggests a permanent change, a reorientation of our lives toward godly, Christ-like living.

Jesus receives this gift of the Holy Spirit in Mark's account of his baptism. As he emerges from the waters of transformation, a dove descends upon him. The Greek scripture literally suggests that the dove penetrates Jesus, the Holy Spirit enters into Jesus. The Spirit of God gets inside him to seal his identity, to empower him for his mission as the Son of God.

Scholars have long wondered why Mark developed the image of the dove for the baptism of Jesus. In the Roman imagination, the descent of a bird was a crucial omen for the life of a great leader, and this bird was almost always an eagle. Mark changes the bird to a peaceful dove instead of a combative eagle. The reign of God, for which Jesus is the leader, comes as a peaceful and sacrificial dove instead of the mighty Roman eagle.¹

Baptism by the Holy Spirit entails a significant life change, death to the old life and birth to new life in Christ. As the dove penetrated Jesus, so Christ penetrates us in our baptism, that we might live Christ-like lives. Because we are human, we tend to fall back into the old ways and need to confess our sin and renew our covenant with God on a regular basis. That is one of the reasons we worship regularly, to get right with God again.

Every year our scriptures will remind us of the baptism of Jesus. It is a good time for us to remember our own baptisms and renew our baptismal covenant with God. We will do so in a few moments. This is not a rebaptism, for we believe that we are baptized once into the family of God and that identity as a son or daughter of God is never taken away. We humans, however, sometimes forget that identity and fail to live up to that calling. Our reaffirmation of our baptismal covenant is an opportunity for us to dip in the waters of baptism anew to be washed of our old ways and rise up to new life filled with the Spirit of God.

If four-year old Daniel were here today in his cowboy boots asking, "What is this all about?", I would say, "Daniel, in your baptism you become a member of the family of God. These are your brothers and sisters in Christ, here to greet you and welcome you into the family. In your baptism you step into the river of life and you swim in the saving grace of our God. The waters of baptism are cleansing, preparing you for new life. And be careful, because with this baptism, God's gonna get inside you and set you aflame with the Holy Spirit. As a child of God, you are chosen and marked by God's love, and that will change your life forever." Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ *Homiletics*, January 2006, p. 19.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA