

Order of Worship

Baptism of the Lord Sunday, January 10, 2021

WELCOME

PRELUDE *Carol "Een kindeken is ons geboren"* J. Bull

CALL TO WORSHIP Psalm 29 UMH 761

HYMN 100 *God Whose Love Is Reigning o'er Us* LAUDA ANIMA

SCRIPTURE Acts 19:1-7

PASTORAL PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

HYMN 252 *When Jesus Came to Jordan* ANGEL'S STORY

SCRIPTURE Mark 1:4-11

MESSAGE Rev. Rebecca Voss

GENEROSITY, INVITATIONS and CELEBRATIONS

HYMN 571 *Go, Make of All Disciples* LANCASHIRE

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE *Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam* Anonymous

Prayer Corner

We lift up the family and friends of Alberta Cunningham, a longtime and active member of our congregation, who died and was raised with Christ on December 29 at the age of 101. Thank you, Lord, for her long and loving life with us. Comfort us with your peace as we celebrate her life and legacy.

We grieve with Betsy Larson as her husband, Todd, suffered an aneurysm beyond recovery. We praise you, God, for being able to use his organs to save several lives. Bring your peace and provision to Betsy and their children Steven, Chloe, Lincoln, London, and Dane.

I was baptized on my parents' 1st Anniversary when I was barely a month old. There are pictures and a certificate to prove it, but I certainly do not remember it. No one there ever reported that the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove, and the voice of God resounded with a blessing. I suspect it was like most other infant baptisms – a special gown, wet hair, exhausted parents, proud sponsors and relatives, and a sleepy or wiggly baby.

What's the big deal about baptism? To some it seems like an unnecessary formality, to others it feels like a deal with God to make sure someone goes to heaven. To many it is a tradition that we follow out of either pleasure or pressure. We debate whether it is biblical to baptize an infant before they can believe, or whether we should wait until people are old enough and can make the decision themselves. Some even argue about how much water is necessary – should we sprinkle, pour, or dunk?

The passages we read today are about John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River, and years later when Paul is visiting the believers in Ephesus to see what they understood about baptism. Let's dive in to get a better understanding in our heads and hearts about why Jesus showed us that baptism is central to a life of faith. Are you ready to get wet?

Baptism has roots in not only Hebrew purification rituals, but also in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Hittite, and Greek history and culture. Various water rituals were like a "soul sanitizer" for much of the world for many millenia. Sometimes it was a ceremonial hand washing or a Jewish *mikvah* bath. The point was, and still is, the same: we all need to confess, repent, and be forgiven. We clean the outside symbolically as a way of also receiving clean hearts and clear thoughts. We need the stains on our souls washed away and our lives given a fresh start.

Those fresh starts are great. However, it does not take long before we realize we're prone to wander and leave the God we love in pursuit of the things that end up hurting us and others. Baptism is more than an individual fresh start – it is also a commitment by a community of faith that helps us develop spiritually and stay in love with God and each other. Just like being part of a workout group makes it more likely to meet your physical goals, being an active part of a church makes it more likely that we will gain strength and stability in our spiritual goals of faith, hope, and love.

But what about the whole issue of whether we need to be able to believe before we're baptized? I was barely old enough to burp and babble, let alone believe, when I was baptized. Others of you, like Martie, come from a Baptist background that is centered on the understandable idea that baptism comes after belief, not before. There is certainly room for healthy dialogue and even disagreement, so as your pastor I'll share what has shaped my understanding.

Over the years I've struggled about the why, when, and how of baptism. My personality is not inclined to appreciate rituals and formalities, especially when it is more a show of faith than an act of faith or grace. But there is little denying the fact that in Jesus' parting words he commanded his followers to go everywhere and help one another follow Jesus and be baptized. (Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:15). Some churches interpret this as an "ordinance", and other churches interpret it as a "sacrament". Other Biblical practices, like communion, foot washing, and confession fall into these two broad categories as well. What is the difference? In summary, an ordinance is a ritual sign of our commitment and obedience to God, and a sacrament is a sign of God's commitment and grace toward us. In the United Methodist church, we believe baptism and communion are sacraments, "an outward sign of inward *grace*, and a *means* whereby we receive the same." John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984) 378-97.

If we see baptism as an ordinance, the emphasis is on the faith and actions of the believer. In a sacramental view of baptism, it is not the faith of the one being baptized, or their parents, or even the pastor that matters. It is a vivid and visual sign that God always makes the first move in creating a relationship with us. God reaches out to us from the very beginning and assures us that we are his beloved. We can't earn God's grace by our good works or sophisticated doctrine. Whether we are babies or adults, have high IQ's or significant developmental delays, or are raised in privilege or poverty, God is the one who first comes to all and says, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Cor. 12:9).

John Wesley had several ways of describing grace. The type of grace at work in the sacrament of baptism is called "prevenient" (or "preparing") grace. It simply means God's grace that goes ahead of us before we can even have faith. I like to use the analogy of a pilot light on a gas fireplace or stove. The sacrament of baptism is like

God lighting the pilot light in our souls. That pilot light never goes out, and so baptism is something that only happens once. With the pilot light on, we're prepared to accept the gift of faith ("justifying" or "saving" grace) that lights the flaming warmth and light of the Holy Spirit in our lives ("sanctifying" or "growing" grace).

The sacrament of baptism is primarily the act of God's grace that also includes a promise by the parents and church to raise the baptized in the church so that they can accept grace through faith through confirmation and continue to grow deeper as followers of Jesus the rest of their lives. Whether you're baptized as an infant or an adult, in the United Methodist Church we believe it is God's power that makes it possible, not the person's position or persuasion.

So what about the waters of baptism? For what it's worth, the Jordan River is little more than a muddy stream. Many of us imagine a beach and the refreshing sound of waves or a babbling brook. But for those who have never learned to safely swim, including most people in Jesus' day, water is also associated with drowning and death. When we're baptized, the sin we both inherit and act on is symbolically drowned and buried in a watery grave. Then we are raised up in hope and resurrection. It doesn't matter how much water is used (sprinkled, splashed, or dunked), but that we see how gracious God is in reaching out with forgiveness, new life, and a new identity as God's beloved child.

Fast forward from John's baptism of Jesus through his life, death, and resurrection to Acts 19:1-7 when the first churches were being formed. Early on they followed the John the Baptist tradition of focusing on the human element of repentance and conversion in baptism. But Paul recognized something was missing, as it always is when we think faith centers on ourselves. They were missing the Holy Spirit, who starts as a pilot light in our souls and at the right time is ignited into a heart-warming and soul-transforming radiance in our lives. They moved from self-sufficiency to divine empowerment.

Have you been baptized by God's grace? Are you willing to accept and nurture the gifts of grace that grow in and through you? Even before we could begin to grasp faith, God's Spirit declares, "You are my beloved and are pleasing to me". May we each accept and unwrap the gift of baptism and walk a journey of faith, hope, and love by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.