

Baptized to be the Church

by

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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Many of you made sure that I saw the *New York Times* article a month ago, about how evangelical Christians are whooping it up at baptisms. The story had a catchy title: “Horse Troughs, Hot Tubs and Hashtags: Baptism is Getting Wild.” In congregations that baptize by immersion, ceremonies that used to take place in a formal baptistery inside a traditional church, perhaps a painting of the Jordan River behind the tank, an organ playing softly in the background, are giving way to more upbeat occasions. The long white robes have been replaced with T-shirts, jeans and sneakers. The music now is often a rock band with electric guitars and a loud set of drums. Many contemporary church buildings no longer install a baptistery for immersion even. Rather, a church in Texas brings in a galvanized steel livestock trough for baptism services, and congregations in Florida head to the beaches and wade into the waves. The article profiled one congregation which goes to a Waterpark on baptism Sundays.

Now, of course, these are not religious communities that are practicing infant baptism, so these wilder modes of immersion are for teens and adults. The article says, “Contemporary evangelical baptisms are often raucous affairs. Instead of subdued hymns and murmurs, think roaring modern music, fist pumps, and boisterous cheering. There are photographers, selfie stations and hashtags for social media. One Texas church calls its regular baptismal service a plunge party!”¹

I read the article and thought – clearly, I was meant to be a Presbyterian and serve a traditional church like Bryn Mawr! I *actually* love the fact that folks are getting baptized in the ocean and inflatable wading pools and even a galvanized feeding trough to the celebratory sounds of cheering crowds. Every baptism is a celebration, when a child of God is welcomed into the church of Jesus Christ, and far be it from me to judge how another communion of Christians chooses to perform this sacred ritual. I am certainly glad that the 16th Century days are long over when wars were fought between Protestants, Catholics and the

¹ Horse Troughs, Hot Tubs and Hashtags: Baptism is Getting Wild,” *New York Times*, 11/29/21.

Anabaptists; when people literally lost their lives for taking a stance on Infant Baptism versus Adult Baptism. However, there is something in our theology of baptism that is more than celebratory, which merits a more quiet reflection, a pondering in our hearts, to use a potent image from Luke's gospel.

When Pastor Rachel leads her baptism readiness gatherings for families with young children, she always asks parents – What are your hopes for your children as they grow up in the church? It is an important question, a solemn question, a question not to be lost in the joyful celebration of the moment. Whether we sprinkle a few drops of water on the head of a baby, or fully immerse a professing adult under water, we make two affirmations of faith. By the grace of God, we are cleansed of our sin for a life to be lived as forgiven children of God. And, by the grace of God, we are baptized into the death of Jesus and thereby emerge as resurrected disciples. In a word, freed from sin and death, in baptism we are called to incredible responsibility, a life of service in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

This is a joyful occasion, to be sure, but baptism also calls for solemn reflection. To be a member of the household of God is to join a counter-cultural movement that is challenging, boundary breaking, risky. Following Jesus is hard. We often quote the Apostle Paul at Memorial Services, saying that if we were baptized into the death of Christ, we will surely be raised in his resurrection. Our baptism is completed in death. Baptism is not just celebrating one moment in time, but a life-long commitment. That's serious theology indeed!

There are three gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus, and Luke's is the most understated and reflective of them all. In Luke, Jesus' baptism is not the main event, but is a dependent clause, taking up only a third of a single verse: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized..."

In his dependable good humor, New Testament scholar, Fred Craddock, remarked that this was no way to say it. It should be more dramatic. Matthew and Mark make a big fuss, why doesn't Luke? Jerome, the early church historian, said he had heard that when Jesus was baptized, fire spread across the surface of the Jordan River. Now that's the way to tell the story! But instead Luke says, "Now when all the people were baptized, and Jesus also..." "It sounds," Craddock notes, "like a line, a line of people being baptized, and there's John at the edge of the water, saying, 'Next,' and it's Jesus." ² Luke's version is understated, reflective, egalitarian.

My preacher friend, Kim Clayton notes, "There is a reason to appreciate Luke's egalitarian description of Jesus' baptism. It takes seriously the incarnation – that Jesus came among us as one of us. It is in keeping with Luke who just recently told us how the lowly shepherds were the first to pay a visit to baby Jesus, laid in a feeding trough in the barn adjacent to the inn. Jesus came among us as one of us, from the beginning; and in his baptism, at this very first moment of his public ministry, Jesus stood in line with us, in solidarity with a world of seekers and sinners." ³

A voice proclaims Jesus the beloved Son of God. Then, according to Luke, Jesus begins his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing, all signs that God's reign is coming to fruition. We know his days will be filled with beautiful moments like healing people and feasting with friends. His life will also be filled with danger – the conflict and hardship of leading people down difficult roads of discipleship, meeting great opposition along the way.

² Kim Clayton, "God's Beloved: Marked By Baptism, Montreat Worship and Music Conference, 2015.

³ Clayton again.

Jesus is baptized for enormous responsibility. And so are we – we who are baptized in Christ’s name, who become members of the household of God, who become his body – the church – using our ears and eyes, our hands and feet to reach out to a world of need in Christ-like service.

We too are baptized for enormous responsibility. The Christian life is, in many ways, celebratory and joyful; the Christian life also calls us to serious work. It’s a comfort we do not go it alone – but always journey alongside the baptized community of Christ in the world.

For everything the church does as a community of baptism carries holy responsibility:

As forgiven people, we walk this weary world forgiving others;

As recipients of God’s grace, we are gracious toward others;

As people who have heard how Jesus treated those around him, we are compassionate.

We reach out in concern to those whom Christ is always welcoming in – the outcast, the stranger, the poor, those in need of healing, mercy, justice and peace.

Theologian Wendy Wright put it this way: in his baptism “Jesus inaugurates the rite that stands at the headwaters of the sacramental streams of new life that the Christian faith promises... In baptism we enter into the lived experience of the faith that emerges from the cleansing, healing, generative waters of life.”⁴

Friends, when Jesus himself kneels in the Jordan River to be baptized by John, we have a picture of what our own life of discipleship means. God names us beloved children and welcomes us into the family of the church. God bestows upon us spiritual gifts

⁴ Wendy M. Wright, *The Time Between: Cycles and Rhythms in Ordinary Time*, p. 19.

and gives us a job to do. We become – like Jesus – holy, beloved, set apart to come up from the water into the world where Jesus walked, to be servants of God, with and for one another, and for the world God so loves. Even without a rock band or wading into the ocean, is our baptism a joyful celebration? Of course it is. But it is also the solemn, life-long experience of assuming great responsibility as followers of Jesus Christ.

We are living in serious times which call us to take our baptism seriously. You do not need me to spell it out for you: Another pandemic surge, with so many lives lost; countless grieving; Devastating fires out West, a horrific house fire downtown. Gunfire everywhere on the rise. A political climate that is on the brink. So many lies passed off as truth. The persistent categorizing of people as Other. The untold depth and breadth of mental illness. The ever widening gap in the world between people living the abundant life, and others barely alive for want of basic human needs – food, water, shelter. We are living in serious times which call us to take our baptism seriously.

The newer Presbyterian study catechism continues the centuries old tradition of using a question and answer format, but updates the language for easier understanding. On Christian baptism it gives this instruction:

Question 71: What is baptism?

Answer: Baptism is the sign and seal through which we are joined to Christ.

Question 72: What does it mean to be baptized?

Answer: My baptism means that I am joined to Jesus Christ forever. I am baptized into his death and resurrection, along with all who have received him by faith.

As I am baptized with water, he baptizes me with his Spirit, washing away all my sins and freeing me from their control. My baptism is a sign that one day I will rise with him in glory, and may walk with

him even now in newness of life. Let us remember our baptism – the joy and the challenge – that we may walk with Christ even now in newness of life.

AMEN.