

Baptism of the Lord
Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11
January 10, 2021
Rev. Dr. Amy P. McCullough

In the midst of an overwhelming year, after another overwhelming, painful week, what shall we say? A favorite preacher of mine once asserted that Christians are never without resources in such times because even when we fear we don't have the right words, we always have central, sustaining actions. We can **do** something: pray, sing, eat, and today, wash. The sacraments are visible signs of God's unfailing grace. Here at the fount we claim again the sacrament of baptism. We delve into the water.

Each year the church remembers Jesus's baptism. At the start of his public ministry, Jesus comes to the Jordan River, joining the crowds who have come in response to John's call to repentance, to offer himself to this cleansing ritual. When Jesus emerges out of the water the heavens open, the Spirit descends, and God's voice affirms his identity: the beloved Son of God.

We, the followers of Jesus, pattern ourselves after Jesus' act: submitting to the waters that promise to wash away our sins, clothe us in something new, unite us with Christ and the new community formed by his life, death, and resurrection. Every time we celebrate a baptism, we recite these core affirmations. Then we conclude: all of this is God's gift, offered to us without price. Think about that. Here you receive life, identity, community, forgiveness, and newness, without price. So today, alongside our remembrance of Jesus' act, we are given the opportunity to reaffirm our own baptismal vows. In a week when the foundations shook, we return to life-giving waters to claim messages of faith that are ours to hold.

The first message of baptism is that you are God's creation. You, and every piece of creation, were made by God. This basic fact of your existence is spoken in the creation story. In the midst of a formless void, when the waters were swirling, God's Spirit entered in, making order, shining light, calling creation good.

Biblical scholars believe the Genesis' account of creation was compiled during the exile. The God's people reaffirmed what their faith taught them about the world, even as their present circumstances appeared to deny that truth. The earth, Genesis asserts, is not the end product of dueling gods or heavenly warfare, but is born of divine intention, an intention for beauty, order, and love.

God's method of creation is by naming. God says light, day, land, sea, creatures . . . and these elements of earthly goodness come into being. Naming something creates an inevitable relationship between the name-r and the named, between creator and creature. We are created by God to be in relationship with God. Note the gentle strength with which God speaks, "Let there be light." God doesn't say "I command that light come." God speaks in a way that invites a response. Let there be light.

This is part of why naming is so important in baptism. The liturgy always includes the inquiry of a name. Who comes for baptism? What name is given? And the space to say "Today John, Mary, Helen, Charlie is presented for holy baptism." Naming affirms that your particular life, traits, and story are unceasingly related to God. Take a moment to say your name and affirm you are God's creation, called into relationship with God.

A second, core element of baptism is the movement by which in this water we are both washed of sin and empowered by God's Spirit to lead holy, transformed lives. These two pieces go together. John the Baptist

focused on repentance, the naming of sin and seeking forgiveness. Even he knew, though, that more was needed, that even repented-of sin can reassert its power. More is provided through the Holy Spirit, the movement of God to infuse us with grace and power. Here is the breath of heaven that urges us forward, making us capable of more than we on our own can do.

The vows of baptism put these two acts together. First we are asked: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world and repent of your sin? Then, do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression? A final question links the two together: Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, putting your whole trust in his grace? Do you see the connection: turning away from sin, resisting its enduring power, and placing your life into saving work of Jesus?

Imagine an adult comes to forward for baptism, carrying upon his body sins of the past, longing for them to be washed away, the slate cleaned of addictions, betrayals, failure to act. When the water is placed upon her head, its coolness does seem in fact to wash away all the grime, dust, scars. But life isn't as simple as one moment. The opportunity to sin will be there again the next morning, the temptation to lurk back into destructive tendencies, damaging behaviors happening day after day. A mentor of mine says, I've come to realize that no matter how old I get, I am still a broken human being in need of God's grace.

We also know that sin is not simply one individual's actions. Sin is a web of failures, compulsions, hatreds, and choices that go against the goodness of creation, morphing into "spiritual forces of wickedness" beyond our ability to wrestle on our own. Here is greed, white supremacy, indifference to human suffering, systems that create tortured ways and the isms that deny too many their full humanity. Any and all of us are capable of being caught in this web.

What does the liturgy say happens in baptism after we answer these questions about wickedness, evil, sin and trusting Jesus's saving grace? It says this water is a sign that God washes away your sin, clothes you in righteousness, and immerses you in Christ's dying and rising so that we may be a new creation. In his death, Christ destroyed the power of sin. If we enter into that death, then sin's power upon us is loosened and the way is open to follow Christ into a new creation.

There is one final message of baptism, a message I believe gets lost sometimes when we are caught up in the beautiful pieces of the liturgy. We focus on feel of the water, the bright potential of the baby dressed in white, the thrill of saying a name and welcoming them into the community. All are good, beautiful pieces of baptism. But the words said here at the font should not forgotten in the joy of a celebratory brunch afterwards. Real practices go along with this new life. These vows place real obligations upon us.

Preacher John Timmer shares a sermon titled "Owning Up to Baptism," in which he notes that as we are made Christ's by our baptisms, we are made equal before Christ.¹ Yet, he notes, we continue to live in a world of hierarchy, where some are granted more privileges than others. His sermon was addressed to those in a different denomination who argued against women's ordination. But his point is infinitely transferrable to the new way of living expected of every baptized Christian. As he right suggests, if through baptism we move through Christ's death and resurrection into something new, then we need to live up to these implications. We need own the holy way of living baptism requires of us.

¹ Timmer, John, "Owning Up to Baptism" in *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today's Preacher*, Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., eds (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 278-284.

Friends, I know you can make connections between what has played out at the U.S. Capital this week and that sentence. I want to speak a little closer to home, here at Grace and in Baltimore. This past summer, following George Floyd's death, Grace's Church Council began its work of fighting racism. One piece of our discussion was acknowledging that in the 150 years of Grace's life, we have our own complicit history in the racial wounds that plague our nation. It was a sobering conversation, also an honest one, that I believe is an act of entering into the water, dying to sin and being raised with Christ. In the past months, Grace has made steps to do the work of dismantling racism. That work must and will continue. Secondly Wednesday's Washington Post had an article about Baltimore's new mayor, Brandon Scott, and in discussing the challenges facing our newly elected official, it described our city's reality with these words: struggling public schools, state's highest poverty rate, more than 300 homicides in each of the past six years. My friends, this is our community. These words represent God's children, which means they are our sisters and brothers.

In baptism we die to sin and rise with Christ. We are given power to resist evil and oppression in all their forms. We join a community of transformation, as the water sends us forth to serve. We have a responsibility to implement that newness. One of my goals for 2021 is to form intentional relationships with agents of change in our city, to learn from others invested in answering these urgent issues of education, poverty, joblessness and in a humble way, asking how this community of Christ can contribute meaningfully to the change. It is a journey of learning more about how we can join that web of mutuality that restores the goodness of God's creation.

What does our baptism mean? We are created by God and called into relationship. We drown with Christ in death, defeating the power of sin, and then emerge in his risen, new creation, to be a Spirit-led community of change. This water is for you. For us all. Remember your baptism, and be thankful.