

It Begins with Baptism
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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill
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Matthew 3:13-17

Do you remember the film, “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” The Coen brothers, who created such fabulous films as “Raising Arizona,” and “Fargo,” borrowed loosely from the plot line of Homer’s *Odyssey* for a comic saga about three cons on the run in 1930s South. I love “O Brother...” for many reasons, the least not being it gave us a totally unhinged George Clooney PLUS some of the best music ever, including “Down in the River.”

In that memorable scene, the three men are again on the run, and they emerge from a forest into a beautiful glade, complete with flowing river. A group gathers at the river, a congregation, and the preacher begins baptizing dozens and dozens, “full immersion.” The three cons on the lam are bewildered and intrigued. The Clooney character calls those being baptized a bunch of “chumps,” but another stumbles into the river, speaks to the preacher, and is baptized, fully immersed. He emerges from the water, joyful. He calls out to the other two. “Come on in, boys, the water’s fine.”

Come on in, the water’s fine.

Some of us are still hanging on to Christmas, not quite ready to – as Ann Weems suggests – “put the Holy Family back in the box.” Yet life moves on, for Jesus, for us, for all who gathered at the manger or followed that star with beams so bright.

Matthew, Mark and Luke – called the “Synoptic” gospels because of their similarities – offer versions of Jesus’ baptism. Matthew’s version is preceded by a kind of proclamation by John the Baptist, in words you might remember from Advent, preparing a way in the wilderness. John then sets the stage: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Jesus appears from the north to be baptized by John. Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, Jesus who John has just said is so powerful that no one can even carry his sandals, that Jesus, is asking *John* to baptism *him*. It is a profoundly powerful moment, humbling and human. John questions. Jesus confirms. John consents. John baptizes Jesus. Jesus already knew that the water was fine. And when he came up out of the water, the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove and a voice from heaven identified him: “This is my Son, the beloved,” and blessed him with a blessing. Then it is all over as quickly as it happened, with little of the literary or theological detail that we so crave. Jesus is immediately taken to the wilderness for forty days of temptation. He knows what is coming.

It is theologically consistent, to be sure. Our tradition affirms that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. On this morning he is certainly divine. But he is also fully human, a humble servant, entering the water as one of us, immersed in a moment of deep vulnerability.

We are Presbyterians, of course, and for us a few drops of water will suffice. But if you have ever been to a church whereby full immersion is practiced – indoors or outdoors – you know what a powerful moment it can be.

Yet what strikes me also is another kind of power, the power of humility and service, Jesus' willingness – at that moment and as a signal for all the moments to follow – to be fully one of us.

I don't know if you remember your own baptism. I don't remember mine. It happened when I was just a few months old, as my parents packed me up and drove me from Rices Landing, PA to Akron, Ohio, their home church, First Presbyterian Church. Do you remember your baptism? How old were you? Your children's? Or grandchildren's?

You will know that we Reformed and Presbyterian Christians have been around on this topic as well for several centuries. Some of our best theologians have fussed over the meaning of all of this, including asking the question whether children should be baptized at all. Karl Barth didn't think so. We have decided "yes," but not without debate. How can a child understand what is going on, some have said, let alone a baby? Well, they can't. Adults answer the questions for them, and then years later, the youth, or young adult, or grown-up, answers the questions for themselves – confirms the promises made in their baptism.

We understand full well the arguments for what some traditions call "believer's baptism," and surely they have a voice to share in our thinking. How could a baby understand? Well, they can't – which is the point. If we believe in this grace stuff, that we are welcomed not on our own merits, but because of the free and radical and extravagant grace of God – then what better way to demonstrate such a conviction than through the presentation of a baby at that very moment, whose baptism could never, ever be viewed as a self-determined, self-initiating act.

Jesus simply shows up and enters the water, one of us, fully human. No less than John the Baptist loses the debate with him on worthiness and qualifications and credentials. And when he emerges from the river, we know fully where that moment is leading him. It is leading him to deep conflict with the political authorities and religious leadership. It is leading him to counter-cultural teachings and growing crowds. It is leading him to healings that upset the powers that be. It is leading him to liberating encounters with people whom polite society would rather ignore. It is, ultimately, leading him to death.

We sense it even now, so fast on the heels of Christmas, that the story takes him from Bethlehem to Jerusalem – and the River Jordan serves as the kind of pivot point, a prism for all that has been and all that will be.

It is no different for us, of course. That is the point. John the Baptist was right. Jesus didn't *need* to be baptized. Yet his full humanity compelled it. We don't either, I suppose. Baptism serves for us as a sign and a seal, a sign that points us to God's grace and a seal that confirms what already is, God's unending, unbreakable love for us. We call it "covenant."

Baptism itself doesn't save us; it points to that which already is. And yet we need signs and seals, as symbols and reminders, so we need baptism to remind us of what is, that we are born into relationship with God. We belong to God. We are accepted by God. We are included by God. We are loved by God, unconditionally.

Whether baptism happens the Baptist way or the Greek Orthodox way or the Presbyterian way or some other way, baptism indicates something wildly alternative. It indicates, it demands, that we need something beyond ourselves to fully become ourselves. And it indicates that to be fully ourselves, we are not about ourselves, but rather about the world and those who live in it. That is *our* responsibility to the baptismal covenant. Having been loved by God unconditionally, we now serve God in gratitude by loving God's world and loving our neighbor.

Baptism is not a private experience – it is a public, communal enterprise. That's why we do it the way we do it, on a Sunday morning, with all of you making vows, and not off in a private room somewhere. We are not baptized unto ourselves, but rather we are baptized into a community, an unlikely family, a body.

And even then, we would understand that baptism frees us not only to live fully within the life of the church, but in and for the world. Baptism confirms our identity as beloved children of God, and then ripples out, confirming our vocation as a servant of God, and more so, marking us for leadership in the church and the world. All of us. Leaders.

Baptism is not only our entry point into the body of Christ, the church. It is our first credential for service, and the most important one. To that end, this conversation about baptism and leadership says something about our ordination practices, I would suggest. Ordination may particularize our service as minister, elder, deacon – but it does not set us above. Baptism is the great leveler and ordination is just one way of working that out.

We who pay attention to these things have noted that the United Methodist Church will have at its next big meeting a proposal that will essentially divide the denomination, based on beliefs and practices around human sexuality, marriage and ordination. It is a different proposal than what we adopted in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), one that I labored at and that this congregation supported. In some ways, the Methodists will codify schism before the fact, while we experienced many congregations leaving after the fact. The details differ; the broad contours feel very similar.

I wouldn't dare give advice to the Methodists, but in looking back I do think we Presbyterians would have been better-served had we remembered baptism as the essential entry point into

the church. That would have reminded us that ordination does not set people above others, but rather places them in the community with certain and specific gifts that complement the certain and specific gifts of all of us.

Any policy that establishes second class citizenship, a categorical prohibition, seems problematic in the church, and is antithetical to what we believe about baptism. A different way to say it, more pointedly, is that if we can't even consider someone for leadership, then we shouldn't baptize them in the first place— which sounds preposterous. And so, it begins with baptism.

That means we live life without fear, because God's covenantal love is unconditional and unbreakable. And it means we can serve freely in the world because baptism gives us all the gifts and the only credential we will ever need.

Of baptism, Kathleen Norris writes that "All Christians are considered to have a call to what is commonly termed 'the priesthood of all believers'; all are expected to use their lives so as to reveal the grace of the Holy Spirit working through them. It's a tall order," Norris says, "to literally *be* a sacrament..."

She tells a story: "It was January, bitterly cold and windy, on the day that I joined the church, and I found that the sub-zero chill perfectly matched my mood. As I walked to church, into the face of that wind, I was thoroughly depressed. I didn't feel much like a Christian and wondered if I was making a serious mistake. Yet I knew that somehow, in ways I did not yet understand, making this commitment was something I needed to do...Before the service, the new members gathered with some of the elders. One was a man I'd never liked much. I'll call him Ed. He'd always seemed ill-tempered to me, and also a terrible gossip...The minister had asked him to formally greet new members. Standing awkwardly before our small group, Ed cleared his throat and mumbled, 'I'd like to welcome you to the body of Christ.' The minister's mouth dropped open, as did mine – neither of us had ever heard words remotely like this come from Ed's mouth...Ed's words, those few simple words of welcome, had power. Like the sacrament of baptism, they seemed to make an indelible mark on my soul." (*Amazing Grace*, pages 141-142)

We celebrate that indelible mark this day, for Jesus, for Carson, for each of us. Remember your baptism. Nurture it. Rely on it. Lean into it. And believe in it – the water's fine. Amen.