

Sermon: March 1, 2009

Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Sermon: "Through the Waters of Babylon"

As we begin moving toward the events of Easter, we need to begin with a reexamination of our own Baptism. Why is Baptism important for the believer? What does it mean to be Baptized? Will God condemn you to everlasting hell fire if you have never been Baptized? Why would anyone want to seek Baptism for themselves.... For their children? Everything we believe about Easter morning has its beginnings in the event of Jesus going down into the water with John the Baptist and receiving earthly Baptism.

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Call to Worship:

To Thee, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in Thee I trust.

**Make me know Thy ways, O Lord;**

**Teach me Thy paths.**

Good and upright is the Lord;

Therefore God instructs sinners in the way.

**God leads the humble in justice**

**And God teaches the humble the way of The Lord.**

Who is it that fears the Lord?

God will instruct us in the way we should choose.

**The secret of the Lord is for those who fear The Lord,**

**And God will make them know God's Covenant.**

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Hymns: #327 O Word of God Incarnate

#72 When Jesus Came to Jordan

#516 Lord, We Have Come at Your Own Invitation

#356 Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing

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Instead of Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed put:

The Heidelberg Catechism: Questions 69-74 Holy Baptism

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*Please greet each other with the Good News: "The Peace of Christ is with you" To which you will respond: "And also with you." All children are requested to join Rev. Button down front for a short message before leaving for Children's Church.*

Prayer of Confession:

Eternal God, we approach Our Lord's table with the understanding that we are not worthy of being here. Only Christ's freeing gift of grace makes it possible for us to partake in this sacrament. Only Christ's liberating forgiveness makes it possible for us to join with the saints of bygone years around this table. Forgive us, loving God for living with the presumption that our good works have gotten us here. Help us to grasp the fullness of your love and grace which has been attributed to us through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. In that understanding we will serve you eternally. Amen.

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Call to confession:

With trembling hearts, knowing that we seldom discern our own errors, we turn ourselves toward the Eternal One. Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation. Come to the One who takes no delight in burnt offerings, but accepts the sincere prayers of the penitent. Let us repent and believe.

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Assurance of Forgiveness:

Jesus Christ, the source of our salvation, died for our sins, once and for all, to put to death the trespasses in which we have been living and destroy the domination of evil among us. We have been reconciled to God, through Christ, and made partners in a new covenant. God is compassionate and merciful, granting us clean hearts and new life in Christ. Rejoice, open your lips, and let your mouths show forth the Creator's praise. Amen.

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Commission and Blessing

A new day is dawning when God's promises  
Will be renewed in the risen Christ.

**All of us will know God,  
From the least of us to the greatest.**

We are people of the covenant,  
In touch with the Eternal in our midst.

**God has acted in Christ to save us,  
That we might live as children of God.**

Go forth as followers and servants.  
Among all who are being drawn to Christ.

**We take the risks of faith,  
Rejoicing in our discipleship.**

Amen. Amen.

Sermon:

Who can remember their baptism? How old were you when you were baptized? Were you 12, or 18 or 24. Or, perhaps you were older when you accepted Christ as your Savior and passed through the waters of Baptism. I was four weeks old when my parents carried me into Bethesda Presbyterian Church and had me baptized. I do not remember my own baptism..... but in a very strange way, I do remember because my parents constantly told me the story of my baptism from the time I was able to comprehend. My memory has been sparked by their telling and retelling of the event. Not only my own, but two years after I was born, my younger brother Andy was born and now I have a memory of another baptism, his. Not because I can personally remember the details but because my parents were fond of telling the story of how mother brought Andrew forward in her arms with my older sister Laura and me holding on to her skirt. Our father, who sang in the choir came down with his choir robe on and right in the middle of the baptismal service I looked up at dad and shouted out “You got your raincoat on, daddy?” So, then I had two memories implanted in me with regard to baptism. Mine and Andy’s. When sister Betty was born seven years after me, she was very sick and we feared that she would not live, so the pastor came to our house and baptized her in the living room. I do have some real memories of that event.

One more story about baptism. Just after Elaine and I were married we moved to Mt. Storm, W.VA. It was part of my seminary training to do a 15 month intern year under the guidance of an older pastor. Well, while we were up on the W.VA. plateau, a local group brought in an evangelist who set up a big tent in a field and held services. Several members from the Mt. Storm Church attended those revival meetings. One day a dear woman

from the Mt. Storm Church came to me and announced that she had responded to the altar call and she wanted to be baptized again. That preacher had convinced her that her first baptism was not effective. She needed to be baptized down at the river and she needed to be immersed entirely in the water. Well, being a young seminarian, I had never faced this problem before. But I knew that Presbyterians believed that sprinkling was just as effective as submersion. And, I knew that we believed that there was no theological justification for redoing one's baptism. I explained to her that baptism is not like a tetanus shot that needs to be repeated every so often just to keep it viable. My explanation did not calm her and she went off with the evangelist and was baptized a second time.... This time by dunking in the river.

There are a lot of misconceptions about baptism. There is one company that will sell you a quart of water from the Jordan River with the assumption that water from the Jordan River is more holy than water from anywhere else. There are those who believe that you must be of an age where you are able to make a decision for Christ before you can receive Baptism. Some people put this age at 12, perhaps because that was Christ's age when his parents took him to the temple. Some people believe that once you are baptized you can never fall from grace, that the rest of your life will be lived in the glow of Christ.

But, should you fall from grace, then that is a sign that the earlier baptism wasn't a real baptism.

So, what is baptism and why do we include it as a sacrament?  
What do Presbyterians believe about baptism?

Let's begin with the word sacrament. As Presbyterians we believe that Christ has laid out for us two symbols of God's Grace. Sacraments are outward signs of inward grace. We celebrate two

sacraments: Holy Communion and Baptism. We do not do footwashings. We do not have the seven sacraments which our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have. Holy Communion we celebrate here at Altavista on the first Sunday of every month. And Baptism is celebrated whenever necessary.

So, Baptism is an outward sign of God's Grace infused within an individual. When the parents of a baby bring that child to the congregation of believers and ask that the child be Baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, they are claiming the Grace of God for that child. That claim is then backed up by the action of the parents as they raise the child in the nurture and admonition of The Lord. Our book of worship specifically states that: (W – 3.3603)

Those desiring the Sacrament of Baptism for their children or for themselves shall make vows that;

- a. profess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
- b. Renounce evil and affirm their reliance on God's grace,
- c. Declare their intention to participate actively and responsibly in the worship and mission of the church,
- d. Declare their intention to provide for the Christian nurture of their child.

Then something very wonderful happens within the congregation of believers. They declare their support of those baptized and express a willingness to take responsibility for the nurture of those baptized, be they infant or adult.

Think about it now. God's Grace is claimed by the one seeking baptism, or, in the case of children, by the parents presenting their child. That Grace is nurtured and grows within that person in direct proportion to the nurturing provided by the parents and the members of the congregation. Therefore, Baptism is not a rite that should be administered outside the context of the congregation of

believers. When the sacrament of Baptism is administered to a child or to an adult it is an occasion for every believer to remember his or her baptism and to commit themselves to nurturing the new believer.

Let me share with you an example of how I was nurtured by the members of my childhood congregation, First Presbyterian Church of Winchester, VA. When I felt the call to full time ministry, I met with the Session of First Church and asked them for their support. They voted to recommend me to Presbytery as a candidate for the ministry, and, they gave me a scholarship to attend King College. The Summer between my Sophomore and Junior years at King I received a call from an attorney in Winchester who was also a member at First Pres. He was chairman of the scholarship committee and wanted me to meet him in his office. I got all dressed up and met him at the appoint time. He began by saying, “The Scholarship Committee has been receiving copies of your grades at King and we question your commitment to become a minister. Your grades do not show us that you are serious. So, we have decided to revoke your scholarship for the coming year. He actually suggested that I spend a few years in the armed forces.

If you choose to go back to college and can get your grades up to a B average, we will consider reinstating your scholarship for the second semester and we will double it.

My father was furious when he heard of the committee’s decision. But I knew they were right. I went back to school and when the second semester of my Junior year rolled around I forwarded my grades to the committee and they reinstated my scholarship and doubled it.

Sometimes, nurturing someone in the Faith means that you need to speak straight language to that person. But first, it means that you have a genuine love and concern for that individual's calling as a child of God.

But what exactly is Baptism? Well, it is the symbolic washing of an individual. In Biblical times they did not have soap, they had water. Water was always the symbol of cleansing. Jesus told the lepers to go and wash themselves seven times in the Jordan river. Did the Jordan river have miraculous healing powers? Of course not. It still doesn't. It is simply H<sub>2</sub>O just like all other rivers and streams. But Jesus knew the psychological power of "washing".

We can go back to the time of Noah. God's intention was to cleanse humanity by washing the land clean with the flood. The goal was to establish a new people with a new covenant with God. No more floods, God says. Instead, God gave the sign of the rainbow to remind all generations of God's promise.

Later in the life of Israel we have the symbolism of God's people passing through water. Moses led them through the parted waters of the Red Sea, and Joshua led them through the waters of the Jordan. In each incident there was a renewing of the covenant relationship between God and man. So, water became a symbol of both cleansing and of covenant.

Then, in that period just prior to the lifetime of Christ, Baptism became a very common symbol of the return of God's favor. John the Baptist practiced the symbolic washing away of sins to all who came out to hear him preach along the Jordan River. "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand," cried John. The sign of that repentance was to step down into the Jordan with John and have water poured over your head. And it is to John that Jesus goes to

receive Baptism as the symbol of God's presence with him as he begins his ministry.

As the early Church developed its understanding of God's covenant through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Baptism and The Lord's Supper became the two signs of how God poured his Grace out upon the new believers. Peter picks this understanding up when he writes:

*For Christ also died for our sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in*

*Order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in flesh*

*But made alive in spirit. In which also He went and made proclamation*

*To the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons were brought safely through the water.*

*And corresponding to that baptism now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh – but an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...*

So, I understand Baptism as a sign and seal of God's Grace shed for our sins in the person of Jesus Christ. There is nothing magic in the water we sprinkle on a new believer or on a child brought by its parents. There is no hocus pocus in the words that are spoken when the baptism is performed. A person does not suddenly change when they receive baptism. But there can be a quickening of the spirit within a person when they realize the magnitude of the sacrifice which God made in Christ to lift us out of our sinfulness.

The efficacy of Baptism is found in what it reminds us of. Christ's sacrifice. God's gift to you and me. There is no magic in the

water, but there is power in the Grace that this simple rite symbolizes.

So, the question today is: can you remember your baptism? Do you remember it often? Do you remember the power that is symbolized in this simple act? And if you have never committed your life to Jesus Christ and received the sacrament of Baptism, don't you think it is time you did so, today?



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