

**January 13, 2019 (Journey worship)**

**TEXT: Luke 3:15–18, 21–22**

**TITLE: Baptism Blessings**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

We are going to talk about baptism this morning, even though no one is actually being baptized today. We Presbyterians don't talk a lot about baptism, which is a shame. Granted, our sacrament of baptism is a little non-descript. There are rarely fancy baptismal gowns on the infants or elaborate baptism parties afterwards. We don't usually have godparents standing up front, since the entire congregation promises to help raise the child in the Christian faith. Baptisms are not uniform events, in that it might be an infant or it might be an adult coming forward to receive the waters. And we don't have the spectacle of Pentecostal full immersions; we have more restrained Presbyterian sprinkling, mostly because we believe that since God is doing the work here, the amount of water used isn't what matters.

Even if we don't talk about baptisms a lot, baptisms are important. Presbyterians define baptism by using three "S" words—it's a symbol, a sign and a seal. It is a symbol, reminding us how in Christ we are washed and made new creatures together. It is a symbol, seeing the water like amniotic fluid that surrounded us prior to our physical births, or bath water that rinses away impurity and makes us clean. Second, it is a sign pointing to something other than itself, something bigger than just you and me. It is a sign pointing to the God who made the world and intends what is loving for all the world, including us. It points to the spiritual quality of life that is more than just flesh and bones, but just as real.

And baptism is a seal—it makes real what has been hinted at through symbols or pointed toward through signs. It is an identifying seal, connecting us with others despite all the silly, sinful, stupid barriers of race, gender, age, sexual identity or denomination we keep erecting to try and keep us all apart. Without being baptized, you can still exist as someone who does good work in the world. Without being baptized, you are still a person loved by God. But with baptism, you choose to respond to the God who calls us to do good in the world—and you choose to gather as part of a shared community sealed by these waters as children of God. That is why baptism is an important ritual, a rite of passage and sacrament of who we are and what we believe.

Now, is it possible to come to baptism with the wrong views—to use this sacrament of community as a mark of separation and division? Yes, it happens far too often. Baptized vs. unbaptized, sprinkled vs. immersion. All humans are prone to distorting things in ways that ultimately aren't helpful or honest. I may have confessed this already to you, but when our children were young, there were times we told them a lie. We lived in a corner house back in Wisconsin, before moving here to Pittsburgh, in a neighborhood with lots of small homes and young families. That meant all summer long, there would be lots of ice cream trucks driving up and down our street—slowing moving vehicles blaring out endless loops of "The Entertainer" or "Turkey in the Straw." We didn't want our kids rushing out into the street, nor did we feel like buying a popsicle six times a

day. So we told our kids those were “music trucks” that drove around the neighborhood playing music for everyone. This worked well until the day Ian came running in the door and said, “Hey, did you know that the music trucks sell ice cream?”

Like I said, human efforts to control things don’t often work for the best. Baptism by definition is a sacrament designed to counter this sinful tendency. It is a free gift. It doesn’t care about your wardrobe, your wealth, your age or your status. It signals an end to one chapter—an end to our old beings focused on ourselves—and the beginning of a new chapter, a time of grace and forgiveness and community and being truly beloved. As one writer put it, baptism is a God-given one-time event that takes a lifetime to finish.

Now recall the verses we read earlier from Luke’s gospel about Jesus’ baptism. Luke’s version is different from the other gospel accounts. It never says explicitly that John baptized Jesus, but we can assume that John did the act. It doesn’t say where Jesus was baptized, although we can guess it was in the Jordan River. But to me, what is noteworthy is the comment in verse 21, where it says this: *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove.* It’s that first detail that is so striking, that Jesus was baptized in the midst of a whole crowd of people—a non-descript group lined up there along the banks of the Jordan River, in which Jesus patiently moved forward (as if waiting to checkout at the Giant Eagle or get his boarding pass checked at the airport) until it was his turn to be baptized by John. There he was, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the one who came to earth to be in our midst literally in our midst. Even in baptism, Jesus fully, completely identified with us.

Baptism is an amazing thing. It points back to the ancient Jewish *mikvehs*, the ritual baths in which women and men received a thorough washing away of impurities so that they can move forward, clean and new and forgiven. Baptism has been called a type of dying—a descent into water, into a place of darkness with no oxygen, only to emerge once more to fill our lungs and see the light of day. Baptism has been linked to Jesus’ own death and resurrection, the descent into the grave, the resurrection into the Easter new day. It has been linked to birth and to the gospel promise of being “born again.” But mostly it is a sacrament, a symbol/sign/seal about something we simply have to trust. Why? Because it is not something we do, but something that is done to us. We let go of control. We are submerged. We have water poured over us. We become part of something that already exists—receiving baptism into a community and newness of life that we can fully trust.

Now don’t forget the last part of Luke’s description—vs. 22 when the voice from heaven says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” On that day, in the midst of the other people, Jesus received this blessing “You are my child, with whom I am well pleased.” It affirmed his calling. It reinforced his ministry. It verified his status as one beloved. And it established the model for what happens at our own baptisms—that we too are beloved.

Here's why this is so important. To know where you're going in life, you need to know where you're starting from and who exactly you are. Baptism is a blessing that provides both these things. It says, "No matter what else may happen along the way, here is a moment you can fall back on—a starting point for the life yet to come." Baptism is a moment in which you don't do anything, but in which you receive everything. You are named. You are washed. You are given an identity as a Son, Daughter, Child of God's own grace. And if you want to know more about where you're going, it reminds you that you've come from a place where you've been called "Beloved." Baptism water may evaporate quickly and words spoken about you by the Holy Spirit may soon fly away, but the water and the blessing abide with you all your life long.

Knowing that you've been baptized, claimed, named, and beloved by God, allows you to step forward by faith. Is that a risky step? Yes, it can be. Ask John the Baptist, Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr. Is it difficult to move away from the past and step into a new future? Yes, ask anyone who moves away from domestic abuse or addiction, who awakes each morning after the death of a parent, child or partner, who loses a job or gets a serious medical diagnosis. No one can pretend those steps are not hard to take. But by faith we affirm that you are never alone as you walk that path. The same Savior who waited in line by the banks of the Jordan River is beside us still—seeking us out, like lost sheep and prodigal children, surprising us behind our locked doors like the risen Christ did on Easter long ago, reassuring us as baptismal colleagues that He is with us even to the end of the age—and that we remain beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

Many of you here today have been baptized, although some of you have not. Some were baptized as infants, some as confirmation teens, some as adults, some not at all. The Presbyterian Church does not encourage re-baptism, as if you need to repeat the sacrament on a regular basis. However, it does encourage reaffirmation of the baptism vows. Here's what I propose for us now. Whether you've been baptized or not, I'd like you to stand as you're able.

At baptism, faith in Christ is professed in which we turn away from the past, from sin and brokenness, and turn toward a future as Christ's follower and God's beloved child. I invite you to answer the three questions usually asked at baptisms—either to reaffirm what was said once before at your own baptism or to profess this faith in Christ anew today. If you're not comfortable answering the questions, that's fine. God is patient. And if you're not been baptized before and this prompts you to seek that sacrament, talk to me later.

Here are the three questions:

1. As beloved children of God, do you turn away from evil and its power in this world? Do you?
2. Do you turn to Jesus Christ, accepting him as Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? do you?
3. Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his word and showing his love? Will you?

Let us all remember we are beloved—let us remember our baptism and be thankful.

AMEN