

Romans 6:1-11

Luke 3:1-17, 21-22

June 19, 2016

The Sacrament of Baptism

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**On the Road with Jesus
AT THE RIVER**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Then there's the old story about a man who was stumbling through the woods, totally drunk, when he came upon a preacher baptizing people in the river. He proceeded to walk into the water and bumped into the preacher. The preacher turned around and, though almost overcome by the smell of alcohol, asked the drunk, "Are you ready to find Jesus?" The drunk answered, "Yes, I am."

So the preacher grabbed the drunk and dunked him in the water. Then he pulled him up and asked him, "Brother, have you found Jesus?" The drunk replied, "No, I haven't found Jesus." The preacher, shocked at the answer, dunked him into the water again, for a little longer.

Then again, he pulled him out and asked, "Have you found Jesus, my brother?" The drunk again answered, "No, I haven't found Jesus." By this time the preacher was at his wits' end, so he submerged the drunk once more and held him down for about 30 seconds, until the man began kicking his arms and legs, whereupon the preacher pulled him up.

The preacher again asked the drunk, "For the love of God man, have you found Jesus!?" The drunk wiped his eyes, caught his breath, and finally said to the preacher, "Are you sure this is where he fell in?"

We don't know the name of the river where that man was looking for Jesus, but in our journey through the gospel of Luke, on the road with Jesus, today we find ourselves at the river Jordan. At least, that's a reasonable assumption, since the story begins with John the Baptizer going "into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Luke 3:3) At the end of the story, we find out that Jesus was baptized along with all of the other people who had gone out into the wilderness to be baptized by John.

Considering the historic and ongoing debate about the "right" or "true" way of baptizing someone, it's interesting that **Luke** doesn't tell us how Jesus was baptized. He just very tersely reports "when Jesus also had been baptized. . ." In her radio sermon called "Baptism-Shaped Life" on what used to be know as The Protestant Hour, Dr. Barbara Lundblad said, "*Yet, whatever disappointment we may feel about Luke's lack of attention to the moment of baptism may redirect our attention to what happens after the water has dried.*" I like that final phrase — "what happens after the wa-

ter has dried.” It’s another way of talking about what baptism means for our lives, not just at the moment when the water is placed on our heads or we are put under the water, but especially for our Christian lives as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. At the conclusion of her sermon, Dr. Lundblad said, *“Baptism ends too soon when we focus only on the moment and forget what comes after the water has dried: a baptism-shaped life where God’s Spirit dwells within our very bodies.”*¹

What happened “after the water had dried” from Jesus’ baptism is important for your life and mine. A heavenly voice said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The very next verse in Luke’s gospel says, “Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work.” (Luke 3:23) One other time the heavenly voice speaks almost identical words. On the mountain of transfiguration, Peter, James, and John hear a voice say, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (Luke 9:35) Very shortly after that, Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem where he will die on the cross. Along the way Jesus encounters many people, teaches them, heals them, tells parables, and has run-ins with religious leaders. Through it all, however, Jesus is single-minded in his devotion to God. The water of his baptism has dried, but the Spirit of baptism shaped his life in his ministry and in his death.

Dr. Joell sang a beautiful song this morning, in which she poured out every mother’s prayer — every father’s prayer — for her child — for his child: a prayer for God’s blessing, peace, strength, wisdom, discretion, humility, uprightness, truth, favor, and rest in God’s care always. So, it may seem strange to talk about death as we gather at the font to celebrate the joyous occasion of Ireland’s baptism. But we baptize Ireland in the name of Jesus Christ. We remember that in his own baptism, Jesus was called and identified as God’s own Son. We remember Jesus’ devotion to that calling, a devotion that ultimately led to his death on the cross for our sins.

For a number of years I served on the Examinations Committee in the presbyteries of New Hope and Coastal Carolina. Our job was to examine ministers in the areas of personal faith and knowledge of the Bible, theology, church government, and worship and sacraments. I liked to ask the ministers who were being examined for ordination to tell us about the connection between baptism and the death of Jesus Christ. Sometimes I would get a puzzled look from someone who would hesitate a minute before answering. More often than not, the person would make the connection and talk about being baptized into Christ’s death, about being freed from the power of sin through the death of Jesus Christ, and about being marked as Christ’s own forever in baptism.

That’s the reason for the epistle lesson from Romans 6 this morning, in which Paul writes, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we

too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:3-5)

When J and Joell brought Ireland for baptism this morning, you were asked to remember your own baptism with joy. You were asked to remember your own baptism — even if you were too young when you were baptized actually to remember the event itself — because baptism has lifelong and life-shaping significance. As the beloved hymn says, “All newborn servants of the Crucified bear on their brow the seal of Christ who died. Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim till all the world adore his sacred name.”

No matter how old you are when you are baptized, the meaning of the sacrament is the same. “As an identifying mark, Baptism signifies: the faithfulness of God; the washing away of sin; rebirth; putting on the fresh garment of Christ; being sealed by God’s Spirit; adoption into the covenant family of the Church; and resurrection and illumination in Christ.” What we did over there at the baptismal font a little while ago seals and affirms what we hear in God’s Word: “God’s redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God’s gift of grace and also God’s summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world.”²

We believe that, because baptism is God’s act of mercy of grace and a sign of God’s never-failing faithfulness, we only need to be baptized once. But we also know that our human faithfulness is ever-failing, so we will find ourselves at the river again and again, not to be baptized in the water again, but for decisions at every stage along the road of life. That’s what it means to lead a baptism-shaped life.

In the movie “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” Alison Krauss sings a beautiful version of “Down in the River to Pray.” The refrain says, “As I went down in the river to pray, Studying about that good ol’ way And who shall wear the starry crown? Good Lord show me the way!” Each verse calls someone else to “go down, come on down, down in the river to pray” — sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers, and finally sinners.

The earliest known version of the song, called “The Good Old Way,” was published in 1867 in *Slave Songs of the United States*. There is some speculation that the lyrics contain coded messages for escaping slaves — “down in the river to pray” meant to walk in the river in order to cover their scent and confuse the tracking dogs; “the starry crown” could refer to navigating by the nighttime stars; and “Good Lord show me the way” might have been a prayer to God to show them the safest escape route, the Underground Railroad.

Today we go down in the river to pray, if not literally then symbolically as we gather around the font, celebrate Ireland's baptism, and remember our own baptisms with joy. As we pray in the river, we give thanks for the freedom our Good Lord has given us in our baptisms. As Paul writes about our dying and rising with Christ in our baptisms, "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:6-11)

I often tell this story because it is such a powerful illustration of what it means to live a baptism-shaped life. When Martin Luther, the great Reformer, translated the New Testament from the original Greek into German so the common person could read and interpret God's Word for him- and herself, he was sequestered at the Wartburg Castle. He was there under an alias for his safety, having been excommunicated by Pope Leo X because Luther refused to recant his teachings. The story is that Luther was so filled with self-doubt and discouragement, he would sometimes throw ink pots in desperation. But, when he found himself doubting God's promises, he could also be heard throughout the castle grounds shouting, "I **am** baptized!" Not "I **was** baptized" but "I **am** baptized."

*Take me to the water. Take me to the water.
Take me to the water to be baptized.*

*Glory hallelujah. Glory hallelujah.
Glory hallelujah to be baptized.*

Let us pray: Gracious God, we remember how your Son, our savior, walked to the river to meet your prophet John, how he was baptized with all of them, and all of us. Remind us that our baptisms seal us to go out and serve those who need your grace. Help us to remember that our baptisms are sufficient for our calling. Keep us strong, keep us faithful, lead us beside still waters, that we might abide with you and you in us. Amen.

NOTES

¹Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad, "Baptism-Shaped Life," January 7, 2007, Baptism of the Lord, at www.day1.net.

²"Baptism," Section W-2.3000 in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 2015-2017 *Book of Order* "Directory For Worship," pp. 90-94.