

Sunday - January 10, 2010  
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner  
Sermon - **Choosing Who We Will Be**

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 *“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace for you are our Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.”*

The second Sunday of January every year is Baptism of our Lord Sunday. It is a Sunday in which the scripture reading always tells the story of Jesus being baptized by John. As the New Year opens, it is appropriate and welcome for us to think about our baptism – what it meant, what it means and how we are to live out its promises are far more weighty and important considerations than any New Year’s Resolutions. So this morning, let’s think a bit about baptism.

Baptism is a choice. Not everyone is baptized – not even everyone who worships in church. Baptism is a choice – often it is the parent who makes the choice on behalf of their baby or child. The parent wants to publicly make a commitment about what is important to the parent, that to raise a child with the scriptures, with the activities, with the people, with the community of faith surrounding that child, is the influence they want to offer their child. And so the parents bring their children forward in a conscious act of commitment – to be witnessed publicly and to ask for the community of faith to surround their child with support and encouragement in this journey of faith.

For those not baptized as babies or children, the choice of baptism is then a conscious one later in life by the individual – maybe as part of a confirmation process at age 13 or even later as an adult.

This choice to be baptized indicates who we will be. Our baptism gives us a new identity. By being baptized we are saying that we believe in Jesus Christ as a personal Lord and Savior, not just as a rabbi, teacher, preacher, healer. We are saying that we know we are sinful and that we desire to turn from our sin. We wish to start anew. We want to immerse ourselves in situations, and words, and people and activities which will help us in our faith walk, so we align ourselves with a community of faith, a body of believers, a church family. We who choose to be baptized are making a conscious statement that our faith life is important, that our relationship with God is key, that we wish to lead a Godly life, we wish to follow Christ. We are saying that although we are sinful and will continue to commit sinful acts, we know that we are forgiven and can start anew. We know that God’s gift of grace is offered to us freely – all we have to do is accept it. If we are just open and willing, God will change our lives. And our baptism confers on us not just this gift of grace & forgiveness, but also a responsibility. It is a responsibility to live our life as God wishes – God centered, in love and service of others. All this and truly much more, is indicated in that little handful of water used to mark this transition in our life.

Baptism is a choice. Baptism is a commitment. Some of us are afraid to make commitments – some people are afraid to commit to marriage. Some people live together in a joint home and relationship, sometimes have children and raise them with that person, but just cannot bring themselves to the legal and emotional commitment of marriage. Likewise, some of us are afraid to make the commitment to be baptized. Some of us are fearful.... That was true of the little 3 year old. She knew she did NOT want to be taken up to the front of the church. Her parents got up out of their seats, struggled to smile while attempting to hold this blond-haired wiggler. They purposefully walked to the front of the church with her in tow. She wasn't sure what was going to happen in the front of the church, but she knew it had to do with water, and she didn't like water in her face. She was just completely unsure what was going to happen with these big tall adults and water and her. So, she bolted. Yep, wiggled right out of her parent's grasp and ran back down the center aisle and hid under a pew (yes, one of those old fashioned churches with wooden pews). She thought she was **hiding** under the pew, but she was crying so hard, that every one could hear where she was. She was hiding and crying out of fear – fear of baptism.

With the embarrassment that she caused her parents in front of the whole congregation, they were loathe to try this ceremony again, and so I wasn't baptized until I was 11 years old and could march up to the front and take the vows myself. Fear of baptism.

Feeling terror is not the hoped for emotion we wish baptized persons to have. A large measure of respect and awe is certainly advisable, for a powerful action is taking place. God's action in our lives. God claiming us as God's own child – beloved but that is to be considered good, not terror-producing.

Jesus came willingly to be baptized. Jesus came when he was 30 years old, the gospel of Luke tells us. You know, there are huge gaps in the biography of Jesus. We have the birth stories, then nothing until he is 12 years old and is lost from his parents during the Passover festival in Jerusalem. Then again, no more stories until this story about Jesus' baptism. Each of the four gospels records information about the baptism, but only this gospel record of Luke tells us Jesus' age, 30 years.

John, Jesus' cousin, was a fairly well known preacher at this time, and he preached that people should repent of their ways and be baptized. Jesus came. **WHY? Why did Jesus come to be baptized?** This was a conscious act on his part. We can hypothesize the answers to this question. (1) Jesus decided that he was going to publicly announce his relationship with God and begin his ministry. He could certainly see the need in the people all around him, and here with this baptism he was making his choice, his decision, known to all. (2) Jesus was choosing the path he would follow, what he would do with the time given him - he would be a servant. In his baptism he was declaring that his life would be

spent reaching out to and identifying with those in need of God's love and grace, with those with whom he was being immersed in the very same waters - sinners!

But WHY a baptism of repentance for sin? He was not a sinner himself. Likely because Jesus wanted to identify with us sinners. (2) He wanted to role model the actions we should take. (3) Jesus was showing from the very beginning of his ministry – it began with his baptism, that he was participating in a repentance of my sin, and yours, not his. Just as Jesus died on the cross, not for his own sin, but for yours and mine, so also was he baptized in solidarity with, and on behalf of, you and me. (4) The next activity in his life was to take up his ministry – to actually live with this new calling ---- and Satan immediately came out to try to sway Jesus. This should be a wake-up for you and me as well. Our baptism calls us to ministry activities ---to service of God and others. It will not be easy. There will be roadblocks in our path. We will meet up with people and circumstances that attempt to waylay our focus and dedication..... our ministry life will be like Jesus, for evil attempts to waylay the good. Jesus' response is a good one for us to follow. Our baptism --- for each of us --- is the beginning of taking up a vocation, work for God. I like the quote from Lord of the Rings by Tolkien when Gandalf says, "**All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.**" If we decide to be baptized and we live out that commitment, we will be choosing to be different.

One of the most well known and most different sports figures today who lives out his baptism is probably **Tim Tebow**, University of Florida football player. In this time where many – all too many athletes get at the top of their game and then let their grades or morality slide into the gutter, Tim Tebow stands out as different – because of his baptism and faith in Jesus Christ. Education is important to him. Doing well on the football field is important to him. Working in the Philippines orphanage during the summer is important to him. Witnessing to his faith is important to him. Tebow witnesses in a variety of ways – his character alone is just remarkable, saying that every day there are 4 things important to him God, family, academics and football – in that order. But to put a little extra emphasis out there --- he writes favorite Bible verses in the eye black under his eyes --- I saw at the Sugar Bowl where he wrote Ephesians 2:8-10 .... Now I don't know how many people saw that, but I do know that earlier in 2009 at the Oklahoma game BCS, he wrote John 3:16, and there were 93 million hits on Google for John 3:16. Tim Tebow takes seriously his ministry job conferred on him through his baptism.

In baptism, we are asked to surrender all of ourselves – give up self-centeredness and put God first, agreeing to give our selves to God's will. That's hard. Many of us are like those with the unbaptized arm. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century Ivan the Great was the tsar of Russia and through battles and his leadership he brought the warring tribes into one vast empire, the Soviet Union. Ivan was courageous and brilliant, but so occupied as a soldier-statesman that he did not have a wife and family. His friends and advisors were concerned, reminding him

that there was no heir to the throne, and if anything happened to him the union would shatter into chaos. Ivan delegated to these advisors the task of searching for a suitable bride.

The counselors and advisors searched the capitals of Europe for an appropriate wife for the great tsar and found the beautiful dark-eyed daughter of the King of Greece. She was young, brilliant, and charming. Ivan agreed to marry her sight unseen.

The King of Greece was delighted. This marriage would align Greece in a favorable way with the giant country of the north. But there was one condition, Ivan would have to become a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. Ivan agreed to do it. A priest was sent to Moscow to instruct Ivan in the Orthodox doctrine. Arrangements were concluded and the tsar made his way to Athens accompanied by 500 of his best troops – his personal palace guard.

Ivan was baptized in the Orthodox church by immersion. His soldiers, showing their loyalty, asked to be baptized also. The Patriarch of the Church assigned 500 priests to give the soldiers a one-on-one catechism crash course. The soldiers, all 500 of them, were to be immersed in one mass baptism. Crowds gathered from all over Greece. Just imagine the sight – 500 priests and 500 soldiers, a thousand people walking into the blue Mediterranean. The priests were dressed in black robes and tall black hats, the official dress of the Orthodox Church. The soldiers wore their battle uniforms with all their regalia – ribbons of valor, medals of courage and weapons of battle.

Suddenly there was a problem. The Church prohibited professional soldiers from being members; they would have to give up their commitment to bloodshed. They could not be killers and church members too.

After a hasty round of diplomacy, the problem was solved quite simply. As the words were spoken and the priests began to baptize them, each soldier reached to his side and withdrew his sword. Lifting it high overhead, every soldier was totally immersed – everything baptized except his fighting arm and sword. The unbaptized arm. How many unbaptized arms are here this morning? What are we holding up out of the waters of baptism? What are we unwilling to commit to God?

In and through our baptism, we choose who we will be. And as we live out the promises we made at our baptism, or as we shy away from them we are also choosing who we will be.

Jesus chose – decided, and never shirked from the covenant he made. No sooner had Jesus come up from the baptismal waters than the Holy Spirit descends on him, empowering him, you see, for the journey, for the work ahead.

And then the voice of God thunders, "You are my beloved Son, and with you I am well pleased!" God was affirming Jesus' decision to use the time that had been given to him in self-giving love. "Yes," God was saying to him, "you have understood who you are, why you are. You have chosen the right path and I could not be more pleased with you."

Every day in countless ways we, too, are at the Jordan River. Who will we choose to be this day? Every day you and I are in the wilderness post-baptism, being faced with temptation to ignore the commitments we've made. Who will you be? What voice will you listen to. Which path will you choose.

May we each choose wisely, and may we hear the words from heaven, "You are my beloved sons and daughters. With you I am well pleased!"

Baptism is a symbol of Affirmation.

When Jesus came up from the waters of his baptism, Mark reports that a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This was a dramatic way for God to publicly give his stamp of approval on Jesus' ministry.

In the same way, I believe God is pleased when any of his children follow the example of Jesus into the waters of baptism. We may not hear a verbal voice; we may not see the Spirit descending like a dove; but I believe God still utters the affirmation, "This is my beloved child with whom I am well-pleased."

Baptism is an action in which we admit that Jesus is the answer to life's most pressing questions. When we affirm him as our advocate, we will never again need to feel afraid or abandoned.

B- Baptism is a symbol that we Belong to God.

Baptism is not a bath, although that is an appealing metaphor. Many people like to think of baptism as washing away their sins. When we come to Christ, we are certainly cleansed from our sins, but that is not at all the picture presented in baptism. It's a picture of death, burial and resurrection. Baptism is not a bath, but a funeral bier. If it was a bath, you would need it again and again. But since it is a death and new life, it is a once for all picture of the transformation that has taken place in our lives.

In baptism, we bind ourselves to God through the blood of Jesus Christ. The bottom line is that we have been bought with a price and we are now bound for heaven.

C Baptism is a symbol of our Confession.

Every time I baptize someone, I ask the question, "What is your confession as you stand in these waters?" And they are to reply, "Jesus Christ is Lord."

*Philippians 2:9-11 says, "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

Baptism is a celebration of the change that comes into our lives when we confess Jesus as the Christ. In baptism, we claim the cross and the crown. Through baptism, we come into the Church as a Christian.

D Baptism is a symbol of our Deliverance.

*1 Peter 2:9-10 says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."*

Baptism is a symbol of our deliverance from darkness to light. We once were dead in sin, but now we are alive in Christ. We are dunked in the water, not to proclaim a stale doctrine, but to demonstrate that we have been transformed.

E Baptism is an Expression of the nature of salvation.

Our sins have been removed as far as the East is from the West.

*Psalms 103: 11-12 says, "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great*

*is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us."*

Baptism is not just an emotional experience, but an encounter with the eternal.

F Baptism is a public expression of our Faith in Christ.

Galatians 2:16 says, *"And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ."*

Baptism shows that we have turned our face from the flesh and now we have a foretaste of our future in heaven.

G Baptism is about Grace, not Goodness.

Some people say, "I am not good enough to be baptized." Well, I've got news for you. You will never be good enough to be baptized. Baptism is not about your goodness; it's about God's Grace.

Ephesians 2:8 says, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God."*

H Baptism is about turning our Hearts to Him.

In baptism, we humble ourselves through faith and take the road toward a new home in heaven where we will be joint heirs with Him.

I In baptism, we proclaim our Identity with Christ.

Galatians 2:20 says, *"It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*

J Baptism is about following Jesus.

Matthew 16:24-25 says, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."*

K Baptism means that we Know God and God Knows us.

Galatians 4:8 says, *"Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God..."*

The Key to life is knowing God and being known by God.

L Baptism is more than just saying, "Lord, Lord."

In Matthew 7:21, Jesus says, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."*

We really make Jesus Lord of our lives when we do God's will, and baptism should be our very first act of obedience.

M Baptism means the transforming of our Minds.

Romans 12:1-2 says, *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be*

*transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

N In baptism, we are raised to walk in the Newness of life.

In Romans 6:4 Paul says, *"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."*

O In baptism the Old has passed away.

II Corinthians 5:17 says, *"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new."*

P In baptism we are Plunged into Christ.

Baptism is an acted out parable which pictures our participation in the passion of our Lord.

Romans 6:3 says, *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"*

Q Some people think baptism is a Quaint ritual.

Quaint is defined as odd, antique, or unusual. This practice may be 2,000 years old, but Christians have never quit observing this important ordinance of the church.

R Baptism speaks of our Repentance.

Peter says in Acts 2:38, *"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

In Acts 3:19, Peter says again, *"Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."*

Baptism is a ritual that shows that we have turned from our rebellious ways, we have remembered our God and allowed him to Rescue us from sin. We have renounced our former ways and found our rest in God, the Rock of our Salvation.

S Baptism is a Symbol.

Baptism is a sacred symbol. Some people say it is just a symbol, but they sadly underestimate the power of a symbol with they say that. It is a powerful action that shatters our sin, shapes our lives, and shifts our priorities.

T We are baptized in the name of the Trinity.

We Jesus gave us instructions for baptism in Matthew 28:18-20, he said, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son*

*and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

U In baptism we are United with Christ.

Romans 6:5 says, *"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."*

I Corinthians 6:17 says, *"But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him."*

V Baptism means Victory over sin.

In I Corinthians 15:56 Paul says, *"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

W Baptism is not Works righteousness.

In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul says, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God not the result of works, so that no one may boast."*

II Timothy 1:9 says, *"God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace."*

X This sermon seemed like a really good idea until I began to bog down in the latter part of the alphabet. But I find myself too far along to turn back now. I only know two words that begin with an X – "xylophone" and "X-ray." I guess it has to be X-ray. An X-ray is capable of penetrating opaque or solid substances. God sees right into our hearts and knows who we really are and what we really think.

Y In baptism we say "Yes" to God.

In John 11:25, Jesus said to Martha, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

And Martha responded as each of us must before we enter the waters of baptism. She said, *"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."*

Z Baptism represents faith in Jesus Christ plus Zero.

In I Corinthians 2:2, Paul says, *"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."*

Once we rise from the water, what can separate us from the love of Christ?

Zero, nothing.

Romans 8:37 says, *"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor*

*depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

There you have it, the ABZs of baptism. Now, what hinders you from being baptized?