



Baker Memorial
United Methodist Church
307 Cedar Avenue
St. Charles, IL 60174
Phone: 630-584-6680
Fax: 630-584-6712

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Preaching: Ronni Sue Verboom

Genesis 1:1-5

Mark 1:4-11

“Holy Water”

Water. There's something special about water. It's so soothing to sit by the shore of a lake, or the ocean, and listen to the waves. The gurgling of a stream flowing by enlivens our spirits. I think that's at least half the fun of fishing. It's great to have an excuse to play in the water--- to drowse in the boat as it rocks----- to watch the light dance and sparkle on the surface.

Water is precious to all life. I can picture the scene described at the beginning of Genesis. Can't you imagine the spirit of God moving over the face of the waters? Yes, God's spirit somehow flows through water.

That is part of the beauty and power of baptism for me. I ALREADY KNOW God's spirit through WATER-

- Gulped down, smooth and clear in the heat of summer;
- Soothing aching muscles in a steamy tub at the end of a long day;
- Cool and blue-green satin in a swimming pool or a lake as you glide along under August sunshine;
- Clean and fresh in the shower, washing away grit and grime from the garden;
- Warm and misty in a cup of coffee on an icy January afternoon;
- Cascading with power down a hillside, frothing like a living being;
- Playfully gushing from a garden hose in the hands of an eight-year-old in a swimsuit.

Water. God is made known to us in water.

So, baptism seems like a good place to meet God, doesn't it? God's spirit is in the water- in the pouring, in the sprinkling, in each miraculous drop.

Today we remember and celebrate JESUS' baptism by his cousin John in the Jordan River. We might initially think, "Isn't that nice? Jesus knew God in water, too! Like me, he was baptized. He was washed by that flowing river long ago."

But there is much that we do not initially realize when we remember Jesus' baptism and think of God in the water.

First, a baptism of repentance was difficult for Jews to accept, and Jesus was a Jew. Jews were familiar with ritual washing; they did it every day. After childbirth women carried out ritual bathing ceremonies. Everyone washed after touching a person who had died. But the baptism of repentance was just for Gentiles, non-Jews who wished to convert to Judaism. They were cleansed of their former uncleanness, of their idolatry and worship of false gods.

John preached the need for this kind of baptism TO JEWS. He spoke of their need to repent. This meant not only acknowledging their wrongdoing, but also embracing a commitment to CHANGE their ways. The call to "repent" invites us to turn our eyes and our hearts to God, away from the world, away from ourselves.

What a shock to good, pious Jews! Yet Mark's gospel tells us, "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."

Crowds of people responded to John the Baptist's message. Can you imagine such a scene today? How many of us would show up down at the Fox River if a wild-eyed preacher in grubby clothes spoke with fire and spirit, telling us we need to confess our sins and change our hearts?

I expect those who responded to John's preaching probably WEREN'T the pious Jews of his day. I expect the crowds were folks who felt they NEEDED forgiveness- who jumped at the chance to receive God's cleansing.

Then, through the gathered crowds, Jesus came. He was the One whose sandals John didn't feel worthy to untie. He came with the crowd, approached John like the others, and was baptized.

Think about this. Jews didn't believe they needed a baptism of repentance. Jesus is the One our faith proclaims was entirely free of sin. But he came to be baptized and forgiven of sin.

At Christmas we celebrate God's coming. We celebrate his coming to live with us, to be one of us. The baptism of Jesus tells us how far God comes in being right there with us. Jesus is not only in the same boat with us, but climbs right down into the bath with us.

He who was without sin asked for and received the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

He gathered with the unwashed crowds and stepped into the river with them.

He went under and felt that water swirling around.

He sought to be FORGIVEN; to turn his heart anew toward God.

And when he came up, he felt God's spirit land on him like a bird in flight. He heard God say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

You see, Jesus showed us the way, even in his baptism. By his example, he shows us the way to gladden God's heart:

Don't hold yourself above anybody. We are all in the same pickle. We all need what God can give us. We need to recognize our wrongs, be forgiven for them, and start fresh, with our eyes fixed on God.

We need to give our hearts to God, and commit to following his ways, all the days of our lives.

That's what we do in baptism. We acknowledge our sins. We promise to oppose evil, in whatever forms we encounter it. We accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior and promise to love and serve him. We commit to following him faithfully, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

When we bring young children to be baptized, we make those promises for them. We proclaim our own acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior. We commit to loving him, **BY LOVING THE CHILD BEING BAPTIZED**. We promise to serve and follow Christ in our day to day lives, with the help of the Holy Spirit, so that the child can learn by our example what it looks like to follow Jesus.

When children reach confirmation age in the eighth grade, they are invited to make their own decisions to affirm for themselves the promises of baptism.

Friends, in the United Methodist Church, people of all ages can be baptized. Infants and young children can be baptized. Older children and teens can make a personal decision to be baptized. Adults can be baptized. Usually we sprinkle with just a little water, but we can pour water, we can even baptize through immersion- either by borrowing a pool at a nearby Baptist church, or outdoors in the summer in a river or a lake.

In the United Methodist Church, we also do **RENEWALS OF BAPTISM**. I renewed my baptism when I visited Israel many years ago, in the waters of the Jordan River. I

also renewed my baptism in a glacial stream in the Andes Mountains in Venezuela. It is good to receive God's forgiveness again. It's good to make a fresh decision to accept Christ as my Savior. It is good to make promises to follow Jesus where he leads me, with the Holy Spirit's help. God is always there to meet us in the water.

Lord God, we thank you for Jesus. We thank you that he was baptized. We thank you for the water in our lives that reminds us of your presence. We thank you for HOLY WATER:

It's there to refresh us when we're thirsty-

To wash us when we're dirty-

To renew us when we're tired-

To warm us when we're cold-

To cool us when we're hot-

To delight in, in ways beyond expressing.

Thank you God of love. Turn us again to face you. Wash us clean. May we sparkle with your light. In the spirit of Christ our brother we pray, Amen.