

Water that Changes Everything

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, January 8, 2012.
The First Sunday After the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Based on Mark 1:4-11.*

Around here we take liturgy planning pretty seriously. Some might even say we are a tad obsessive about it. Others, watching us for example learning a new pattern for receiving Communion around the platform, might suggest that we need remedial help! Regardless, it is a big deal, and we pay attention to the details every week, carefully timing all the music, lingering over long readings and disciplining ourselves about sermon length, etc. We also talk about baptism frequently; happily, it is an issue that comes up for us several times a year, as it does today. Ours is an enviable position. Were we to offer baptism only two or three times a year, we'd be absolutely overcome by the number (and volume) of wonderful children and not a few adults.

But it always comes up in our planning sessions that for some parishioners—purportedly—though certainly none here today, baptism is a drag as in, "Oh, it will make the service so long." At St. James' in Jackson, Mississippi, I literally had people say to me, "Oh, I can't come on baptism Sundays; when I do, the Baptists beat us to the Country Club for lunch." Can you imagine the restraint I called forth to not say what I was thinking? My entire ordination, let alone my job, flashed before me each time as I bit my tongue and said, "Bless your heart."

For the record, we are a happy baptizing parish; and though we will plan well so as not to keep you all afternoon, the sanctity of my own Sunday afternoon nap being carefully protected, it is always an occasion of great joy—when babies scream and cry like banshees as they sometimes do and when they are the beatific little bundles of joy we all imagine them to be. It is wonderful, and I believe—anthropomorphic though it is to say—such moments please the very heart of God.

Knowing why that is true is important, or so it seems to me. Though joyful and lighthearted, the act of baptizing is not casual. This is a hugely sacred moment. What is it that makes it so thoroughly sacred? It is clear to me that baptism is not godly because it is a wonderful, sentimental moment, replete with adorable children and proud parents, though it is all that. Nor is it godly because it is an action that snatches just in time the mortal souls of these lucky ones from the claws of a never satisfied Satan. Baptism is important because it confers identity. It tells these children, initially through their parents, godparents, and all of us, who they are; it gives them a blueprint for the living of their lives. It will remind them of who they are—on occasion it will do so in time to affect the choices they make. And at other times, it will in consolation remind them that living into the fullness of their identity is a process and not a moment, showing them a way back through repentance and redemption—big church words with real life relevance.

We need to be as clear as we can be on what baptism and all sacraments are and what they are not. Sacramental moments, like baptism, sadly are often perceived as requirements on a checklist. We get the baby baptized, then confirmed, then married, then, I suppose, buried—with hopes that the last comes a good many years down the road—and along the way, we pepper our lives with the occasional Eucharist, for some a sacramental confession here or there, and for even fewer an ordination or two. We turn to these moments either in times of great joy or great sorrow, and on occasion, I fear as though to appease God, to meet requirements perceived as set forth by God, the completion of which we hope will somehow make us more acceptable, lovable, or savable.

Our salvation is not tied to even the most basic of our sacraments. Baptism does

not save us; the Eucharist does not save us; the other sacramental rites certainly do not save us. God saves us—God alone. We are saved because we *are*; nothing we do can stop it, and nothing we do can earn it. As Christians, these events, which we call sacraments, sanctified and precious though they are, are simply moments, stops along the way that keep us connected to our identity as those who follow Jesus. Religious people of other traditions have other stops; these are ours. What we need to be clear about is that the stops themselves do not give us anything more than a moment, a critical moment to remind us of who we are and to give us the fuel we need to grow into the lives to which we have been called, the identities which we have been given.

Martin Buber says that because the world of the womb is so perfect, so balanced and utterly sufficient and nurturing, when we are born we are inevitably confronted with uncertainty: is this a good place, who am I, who will care for me, what shall I be? He says that we spend the rest of our lives in profound ways answering these questions. I think he is absolutely right; and I believe that in our tradition baptism is a principal way in which answers to these deep longings are bestowed. Baptism for a child, through us and through the Spirit of God, assures a child of his/her belonging. *You are my beloved child, the one who belongs to me, the one in whom I am well pleased.* It is our most essential truth: we are God's; and though that truth exists before the moment of baptism, in baptism we claim it and bestow it upon these children—Michael, Josie, Evan, Declan and Kate: *you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.*

It is not a talisman or a magic shield; unthinkable things happen to the baptized and to those who aren't. It neither answers nor asks all questions; doubt and sometimes outright disbelief may, and in fact quite likely will, find residence at some point in the lives of these precious children. But the truth and script of this day will live in them if it lives in us, those who love and teach them. We hold for them the deepest truth of their identities and today obligate ourselves to whisper, and if necessary to shout to them, "You are the beloved of God, marked forever as Christ's own."

As I have already claimed, it is not a casual event—for those being baptized or for us reclaiming the promises of our own baptisms. We live a particular way as a result of this moment, a way based on the life and teachings of Jesus, never perfectly, never exactly, but always in remembrance of promises made for us, claimed as our own, and reclaimed again and again in the practice of our faith. When its reality is so close that we can feel it, smell it, taste it, baptism leads us to do really wild things—things like loving impossibly and sharing extravagantly, like laughing deep and uncomplicated laughs and crying so hard that we fear our hearts will tear apart and then when they do, learning that we will live through that too, like choosing to live in ways that don't make sense to many, like occupying space and positions that others question, and on and on. There's just no telling what we might do or how we might live when this holy water spills on us!

Are we ready? You bet we are—for we belong to God.

In the name of God. *Amen.*

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