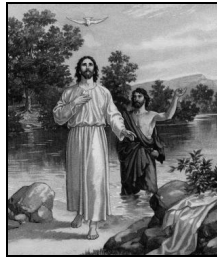


EVIDENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT:

The Baptism of Jesus



"They were astounded and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom? Is not this the carpenter's son?'" - Matthew 13:54-55

"Never confuse a single defeat with a final defeat."
- F. Scott Fitzgerald

Remember, O Lord, thy tender mercies, and thy loving-kindness, for they have been ever of old.

Scripture:

Mark 1:4-11

He will baptize you with Holy Spirit

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And 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. Now, John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of this sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

You are my Child!

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."



THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

This Sunday the Christian calendar celebrates the baptism of Jesus. This day recalls Jesus' baptism by John in the River Jordan.

Standing along the edge of the river that brings fresh water through the Jordan Valley, along the core of the Holy Land, pilgrims met John who was baptizing Jews with a new idea. He adapted the Hebrew ritual of bathing in the Mikvah baths prior to entering the Holy Places into something new. He called people to repent of their sins, and to be born anew from the living waters.

LIVING WATERS

Water was the symbol of all that cleans the dirt from the body. The term "living waters" is the right phrase to describe this river which is the source of everything that grows along its banks, and the valleys into which it is pumped.

To the East, there is nothing but desert. To the west the desert climbs to the foothills, and to the south the water flows to the barren Dead Sea. But along its banks there is life. There are crops. There are fish. There are villages.

We have a river like that not far from us. The Russian River gathers up water from its tributaries; the pumping stations and distribution pipes make life possible for us all.

Life can be a barren land, but a river runs through it. And that river brings all things back to its source. John said that the river that brings life is the spirit of God.

I have two stories about baptisms in the river.

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Do you remember Norman Maclean's tribute to the waters of Montana where he learned to fish, and where his family grew up? The son of a Presbyterian minister, Norman later became a teacher and writer in Chicago. This is Maclean's tribute to the waters that brought life to his family, and where the covenants between family members were formed. You might say that his family was baptized in the river, too. Robert Redford made a movie out of Maclean's book:

To my father, the highest commandment was to do whatever his sons wanted him to do, especially if it meant to go fishing.

On the Big Blackfoot River above the mouth of Belmont Creek the banks are fringed by large Ponderosa pines. In the slanting sun of late afternoon the shadows of great branches reached from across the river, and the trees took the river in their arms. The shadows continued up the bank, until they included us.

Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them.

Of course, now I am too old to be much of a fisherman, and now of course I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think I shouldn't. Like many fly fishermen in western Montana where the summer days are almost Arctic in length, I often do not start fishing until the cool of the evening. Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are

timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.

TENDER MERCIES

In the movie *Tender Mercies*, Robert Duvall portrays, Mac, a down-on-his-luck country singer with a drinking problem. With the help of a young widow, Mac turns his life around, and begins to write songs and to sing again. Both Mac and the widow's young boy, Sonny, become active in a small community church. One morning both Mac and Sonny dress up in their Sunday best, and drive to the church to be baptized.

Driving home after the baptism, the silence is wonderfully awkward. It had been a full dunking for each of them in a church that practices baptism by full emersion. It's not an event that is easy to minimize when you emerge from the water soaking wet, with water dripping from your hair. It takes your breath away.

Sonny says to Mac, "Well, we done it Mac, we was baptized." Mac stares at himself a moment in the rearview mirror. Then the boy says, "Everybody said I'd feel like a changed person. Do you feel like a changed person?"

"Not yet," replies Mac.

"You don't look any different, Mac. Do you think I look any different?"

"Not yet," answers Mac.

Did they think they would look different, and especially feel different right away?

Would they feel warm and different inside? Maybe not.

But Mac's answer could not have been more true.

Maybe not yet, but yet eventually, this will make a difference. What I did today will help me create a better life tomorrow.

BAPTISM

Apart from faith and the Holy Spirit of God, the water in that font won't do anything but get you wet. But when we bring a child for baptism, or

submit to it ourselves, we promise to repent of our sins, to put our whole trust in the grace of Jesus Christ, and to remain faithful members of Christ's holy church. Baptism connects us to everyone else who has been baptized.

Baptism is a source of our unity despite all our difference. We are baptized into the one spiritual body. It takes some time to learn how to live a sanctified life. So Baptism is a starting point, not the endpoint, of the Christian journey.

HOW MUCH DO YOU HAVE TO KNOW TO BE A PRESBYTERIAN?

Here's a question someone asked me a few days ago: How much do you have to know to be a Presbyterian?

I think he wanted to know if there is some kind of qualifying score.

There probably is, but I don't think anyone could really agree on what the passing score has to be.

HISTORY AND SYMBOLISM

To get a good score on the Presbyterian exam, some basic Christian history facts would be helpful. We should know about Christmas and Easter. I think it would be helpful to know what the Bible is, and how we got it.

Who are the heroes and who are the villains in our narrative? We should know some of that.

A Presbyterian might want to know how our church began in Switzerland, and what we were protesting against and why.

The symbolism in this sanctuary, and other sanctuaries, is important.

LOCAL HISTORY

The history of the Church of the Roses, the little church built in one day by Hugh Coddington and his workers, was featured in Life magazine and the Press Democrat. The values we place on mission, education, music, social awareness, and spiritual and intellectual curiosity still characterize the spiritual part we play in the culture of Santa Rosa.

Faith expressed through humility, being merciful, being more ready to forgive than condemn, being a peacemaker, being pure in heart, being generous, being curious, and thankful and

thoughtful and direct and honest ... these are attitudes that are part of our core values.

But behind that is my belief that we are not a congregation of the learned, but of the learning.

ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE

Here is what I think you should know:

Someone made a statement last week that was repeated to me about our Inauguration Day program that might bring some people to our church for a Prayer Service on Inauguration Day. The way I heard it was, "I think that is something John would want us to do, and to see our church involved in."

That was a fair guess, by someone who knew that I would be interested in supporting something of an educational nature, or a spiritually inclusive nature here in Santa Rosa.

We don't come to the Lord's Table because we are worthy, but because we are forgiven. We don't come by age, position, or prestige, but with modesty and gratitude. We come because we are spiritually engaged in life, not detached.

Not only are we a church of the learning, but we are also a congregation of the forgiven.

- How much do you have to know to get married?
- How much do you have to know to offer final respects to your good friend who died?
- How much do you have to know to join a health club?

You have to know that you are ready to make a commitment.

BAPTISM IS A COVENANT COMMITMENT

That brings us back to Baptism. It is a commitment that we call a sacrament. Our commitments define us. Will you bounce from church to church like a shopper in the mall looking for things to make yourself happy? Maybe. Or will you be there when times are more challenging too?

In your own life, will you work to solve the problems of a marriage? Will you stay engaged in the difficult social problems of our times which also have moral implications to them? Will you be part of the solution?

These are commitments.

Should the requirement to be a Christian be higher than commitment?

I can't think of anything that is higher. Theologians call it a "Covenant Theology."

ABRAHAM

Genesis 17:4-10

⁴ 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.'

⁹ God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.'

THE DISCIPLES

Matthew 4:17-23

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

SO HERE IS HOW THEY WILL KNOW WE ARE CHRISTIANS:

- There is a difference between the sure and the faithful. Be faithful.
- There is a difference between the legalist and the lover. Be a lover.
- There is a difference between the person who plays the notes, and the person who sings or plays the music. Sing the music.

It is true that the greater the knowledge, the more satisfying the solution.

- But we have to come to the Lord by what we hope in our hearts, not what we know.
- We have to come to the Lord by the prayers we are willing to pray, rather than the awards that we have received.
- We come to the Lord by the roads we are willing to build, not the walls that we are ready to erect.
- We come to the Lord by the journeys we are willing to begin, not by a letter of recommendation.

NO CHEAP GRACE

That is not cheap grace. That is grace of the most expensive kind because it is grace you can never own, and grace that you must always be giving to others.

"Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind." – Henry James



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