

THE SACRED BLESSING OF BAPTISM



Scripture:

Psalm 29

¹Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. ²Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor.

³The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters. ⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. ⁶He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. ⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

⁹The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, “Glory!”

¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever. ¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



Water is an essential element for life. It can be holy and soothing and refreshing and also dangerous and destructive. We have been blessed with much more rain water than we have seen in a long, long time. Thanks be to God! The rains have been replenishing our dry land with new

life. Even though we get tired of the clouds and the rain, it is such a great blessing!

There are many similarities in the role water plays in the first creation story and the way water is important in the story of Christ’s baptism. When the water and land were divided to create

the earth, the Holy Spirit was involved then, as well. Water and the Holy Spirit are an amazing combination!

After bringing the light into the darkness, God divided the water from the sky and the water from dry land.

In Genesis 1 it reads: "And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' ⁷So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good."

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

The Jordan River was the chosen holy site for the baptism of Jesus. As Christians we consider the Jordan River to be the third most holy site in the Holy Land, after the Nativity Grotto in Bethlehem and Golgotha (the hill where Christ was crucified) in Jerusalem. The Jordan River is the site of the most important event of Jesus' life, his baptism and the beginning of his ministry.

Biblical scholars think that John the Baptizer might have been part of a Jewish group called the Essenes. This group led an ascetic life, a life of poverty and simplicity, in the wilderness of Qumran. (That is where the Dead Sea scrolls were found.) One of the principal religious rituals of the Essenes was a daily immersion in water to regain purity. John turned this water ritual into baptism.

A DOVE

The gospel accounts tell us that a dove descended from heaven and hovered over the water as Jesus was baptized.

The dove's presence is a universal symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit. For those living in Jesus' day, it would have been easy to recognize the striking similarities between Jesus'

baptism and the creation of the world. For instance: The Spirit, at creation, also hovered and moved over the water (Genesis 1:2). At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit of God "represented by the dove" descended upon Jesus. Both had God's approval.

**After creating the world, God was pleased with the creation.
After Jesus' baptism, God said that he was well pleased with his Son, Jesus.
Out of the void, God made a new world that had never existed before.
As Jesus came out of the water, he ushered in a new world order where love and restoration would clearly prevail.**

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

The people had been confused for a very long time about the character of God and God's purpose for the world. Jesus would make it clear that God so loved the world.

As they gathered around the Jordan River shore, those watching Jesus' baptism must have been overwhelmed by the picture God was creating. By reflecting the creation account during Jesus' baptism, God revealed Jesus' calling: to be the Messiah, sent to usher in a new order. No longer would they blame God for suffering, death, and chaos. They would see God's character, through Jesus, who was loving, healing, forgiving, and merciful. Jesus would show them that God is abounding with steadfast unconditional love.

TWO SACRAMENTS

Protestant churches, including the Presbyterian church, believe that God instituted just two sacraments. (The Catholic Church believes there are seven.) We acknowledge the sacraments that Jesus himself directly instituted which are baptism and the Lord's supper.

A sacrament is an outward sign of an inward grace that has been instituted by Jesus Christ. Sacraments signify God's grace in a way that is outwardly observable to the participant. They also facilitate or bond us to be in a closer relationship with God.

In an article titled: *“What Presbyterians Believe: Living and dying in God’s enveloping care”* by Charles Wiley II, he addresses the question: Why is baptism so central to our lives as Christians?

One way to answer that question is to consider the many dimensions of the meaning of baptism. When you ask, “What does baptism mean?” you will get a lot of answers. Baptism is:

- “dying and rising with Jesus Christ;
- pardon for sin,
- cleansing, and renewal;
- the gift of the Holy Spirit;
- incorporation into the body of Christ;
- and a sign of the realm of God.”

[from proposed *Directory for Worship*, W-3.0402]

The dying and rising. Water gives life and water kills. We cannot live without water, and yet few things are as terrifying as being at the mercy of churning deep water.

The cleansing. In baptism we see a cleansing, the cleaning power of water. We experience daily the cleansing power of water with our food, our bodies, our clothes. In baptism we experience the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit but it is a symbolic cleansing from sin and evil in the world.

Baptism involves being gifted with the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures speak of the Spirit’s presence in the anointing. The practice of making the sign of the cross on a person’s forehead demonstrates the anointing power of the Holy Spirit through water.

Baptism also facilitates a sense of being incorporated into the body of Christ. Baptisms are not private; they take place in the Christian community. An important part of the sacrament is the practice of welcoming the newly baptized into the church community. God knows we all need each other to survive.

Baptism is a sign of God’s realm or a path to God’s kingdom. When Jesus came, he echoed

the words from the prophets, that “the day of the Lord had come,” which meant to his followers that they were to live in a new way. The waters of baptism communicate a newness of life. We are to repent of our old ways and follow Jesus in a new direction.

THE COVENANT ASPECT OF BAPTISM

Lastly, we Presbyterians emphasize the covenant aspect of baptism. When we baptize infants, we acknowledge God’s gracious movement toward human beings. We also believe that the Holy Spirit inspires the parents to bring forward their child for baptism. The covenant promise is powerful.

The most profound articulation of this covenant understanding of infant baptism can be heard in the words of the French Reformed Church liturgy:

Little one, for you Jesus Christ came into the world:

For you he lived and showed God’s love;
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
and cried at the last, “It is accomplished”;
for you he triumphed over death and
rose in newness of life;
for you he ascended to reign
at God’s right hand.

All this he did for you, little one,
though you do not know it yet.

And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled:

“We love because God loved us first.”

(*Book of Common Order*, Church of Scotland)

God loved us first. That is what we hold dear. Baptism enacts this all-embracing love of God — the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, who comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit, a love that will not let us go. That is the story of Scripture, and that is the story of baptism....

RENEWAL OF BAPTISM VOWS.

Now hear these words from scripture (Ephesians. 4:1–3 and Micah 6:8) that remind us of our vows in baptism: Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all

humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

God has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you? ... but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

PROFESSION OF FAITH

Please stand if you are able:

Sisters and brothers in Christ, our baptism is the sign and seal of our cleansing from sin, and of our being grafted into Christ. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the power of sin was broken and God's kingdom entered our world. Through our baptism we were made citizens of God's kingdom, and freed from the bondage of sin. Let us celebrate that freedom and redemption through the renewal of the promises made at our baptism. I ask you, therefore, once again to reject sin, to profess your faith in Christ Jesus, and to confess the faith of the church, the faith in which we were baptized. Good Christians what do you believe? (Say Apostle's Creed)

RENUNCIATIONS

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

I do.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?

I do.

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

I will, with God's help.

THANKSGIVING FOR BAPTISM

(Water is poured visibly and audibly into the font)

Pastor Cindy prays: We give you thanks, Eternal God, for you nourish and sustain all living things by the gift of water. In countless ways you have revealed yourself in ages past, and have blessed us with signs of your grace. We praise you that through the waters of the sea you

led your people Israel out of bondage, into freedom in the land of your promise.

We praise you for sending Jesus your Son, who, for us, was baptized in the waters of the Jordan, and was anointed as the Christ by your Holy Spirit. Through the baptism of his death and resurrection you set us free from the bondage of sin and death, and give us cleansing and rebirth.

We praise you for your Holy Spirit, who teaches us and leads us into all truth, filling us with a variety of gifts, that we might proclaim the gospel to all nations and serve you as a royal priesthood.

We rejoice that you claimed us in our baptism, and that by your grace we are born anew. By your Holy Spirit renew us again, that we may be empowered to do your will and continue forever in the risen life of Christ, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.

The minister may place hand in the water, lift up some water, and then make the sign of the cross over the people. Remember your baptism and be thankful. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Benediction:

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forevermore. Amen



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