

## Thoughts on Baptism

### A milestone in the life of a family

On those milestone days, usually after the church service and after lunch when the memories begin to flow, we usually end up looking through the photos albums, (or if you're my family that big box of pictures all piled in there. . . ) Who are half these people?

Somewhere in my sister's house in our box there's an old black and white photo, a little cracked around the edges. It was taken over fifty years ago: my mom holds my sister Wendy on the steps of the church. Wendy has just been baptized. There's my grandparents, my great grandmother. . . (my dad is, of course taking the picture so we can't see him). And there's this cute little kid in a shorts and a blazer and little fedora hat. That's *me*. It don't remember it, but I was there. I was two years old.

Fifty years *from* now, on some other important day, some of us will look through the pictures we will take today and we will realize that we have learned something. Some of us won't be around anymore. The young among us will have grown old. There will have been some heartaches along the way – things we wished had been different. Some will have moved away, and built their lives in other places, and on that day, we will be wishing they could be here with us. But others, total strangers will have joined us along the way. Young people will have fallen in love, married, had children; and they will look at our pictures, the ones we take today, and realize that . . .

### Every baptism tells a story.

Every baptism, in fact, tells the *same* story in a slightly different way; the story of how God created the world and made us as human beings to dwell within it, of how we, as humans, lost touch with God through sin, and how God brought us new life in Jesus Christ. Baptism revolves around a mystery: an overlapping of heaven and earth. The Celtic people spoke of certain "thin places," sacred places of pilgrimage where the border between God's realm and the human realm is unusually porous. Like when Jesus was baptized by John in the River Jordan. John saw, while he was with Jesus in that thin place, knee deep in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descending on the Lord in the form of a dove. This was revealing that God had now begun, in Jesus, to bring into existence *on earth* an entirely new creation – a new heaven and a new earth. On the cross God closed the books on the old creation and in the resurrection, God was declaring that this future, new creation had indeed already burst into this fallen, old, and decaying creation with a new and eternal creation in which sin and death will have no place. And God continues to extend this kingdom on earth through us. So whenever we baptize someone, we're not just using a bit of water to *symbolize* the new creation in Christ, we're actually participating in an act of that new creation.

In the simple but powerful act of placing someone into water, (and it matter nothing how much water or how deep, but only that we do it in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), there is, at some level in each of those who witness this act, a dying to the old creation and a rising again into the new. In baptism, God moves first – before we do. We are always *responding* to him never making the first move.

Baptism isn't *magic*. It doesn't, in and of itself, impart to anyone a genuine, personal, conscious, knowledge of God. But nor is baptism simply a visual aid. Water baptism is one of the points of overlap, established by Jesus himself, where heaven and earth in that very special way interact with each other, where God addresses us, where the new creation and resurrection life appear in the midst of the old and ever dying creation. It is a *thin place* between time and eternity. Two thousand years ago on a cross, God brought us *grace*. The mystery before us in baptism

revolves around how that one act on the cross brings eternal salvation to us across . . .

## **Time**

There's an intriguing statement in the Covenant book of Worship. It reads: "We believe that *whenever* baptism is performed, it conveys the same grace, for *all* grace is *God's*. Underlying our conviction is a recognition of the *mystery* of grace, that it blesses us in *time* and yet is not confined in its operation to the temporal sequence of moments we can trace on clocks and calendars." (Cov. Bk of Worship p87)

In the backwoods of Rainy River there lived a man of God named Walter Peters. He farmed all week and preached every Sunday in a little tiny church up the road from his farm which he built himself. The whole congregation was mostly Walter's immediate family plus a few neighbors. But we often joined them for a Sunday evening hymn-sing and a cup of coffee in that tiny little church where children grew up, got married, loved ones died and were laid to rest. After his wife died Walter stayed alone in his home well into his nineties. And if you looked out Walter's window, across the field you could see at the end of the field a large rock painted white, And on that rock was painted in large black letters the word TIME. You could see it from the road. I drove by that rock for *years* never knowing it's significance. So one day I asked Walter about it and he said he had dug that rock out of his field in 1958 and painted it to remind him that *time goes so fast*. This reminds me of a line from Psalm 90 which is "a prayer of Moses, the man of God." It says, "teach us, to *count our days* that we may gain a wise heart."

God's *grace* is not confined to time. But we *are* and in this tiny little slip of time we are given, we get a chance to know God's love and grace.

Five *hundred* years ago, the great reformer Martin Luther compared the Christian faith to the heavy woollen monk's robe he wore as a member of the Augustinian Order. Luther would say, "Let this large robe be used to clothe an infant. It would certainly cover the infant, keep the infant warm. But it would not *fit*. As the child grows, however, he will grow into the robe until one day he *finds* that it fits -- *perhaps when he is eighty years old*."

Such is the relationship of baptism – the event itself – to *time*. The action of placing some water on a baby's forehead or of someone going down into water and coming up again, is an act of welcome into a new family. One is brought into the atmosphere of the Holy Spirit and Christian faith. We are a family of people who believe in and follow Jesus Christ our Lord. We belong to God. We are God's people. Some of us embarked on this journey long, long ago, some of us are only just beginning. But . . .

## **We are all on the journey.**

Each one of us *today* is moving towards a new stage. None of us has reached the end of the road, but all of us as members of this family are coming up on one or another of life's important milestones at which we realize, if we are willing to receive it, at least at one point, our *robe* can begin to fit a little better. O, sure, it will still be a bit baggy here and there. And I can guarantee there will always be lot of wrinkles in the robe. The oldest and saintliest among us will be the first to confess that even their robes aren't quite as broken in at certain places as they would like them to be. The robe of Christian faith often rubs and chafes us in the most awkward of places. But look around you: there are some robes worn here today that are old and tattered and beginning to fade. Yet ask those who wear them and they will surely tell you their robe has served them; and yes, it's tattered and threadbare, but they won't part with their robe for all the money in the world, because even our elders are still very much on the journey, and without the robe of Christian faith they would be left as naked as the day they were born.

You know, Moses spent all his life as a *homeless* man. Think of it: He was a little naked baby put in a basket and floated away down the river – homeless. After growing up in Pharaoh's house he slays an Egyptian and flees to the land of Midian to live among *strangers*. Forty years later, he returns to Egypt, back to the land of his birth, only to find that he is not now a *stranger* there also – homeless. For the next forty years he wanders in the wilderness, *homeless*. Finally at the end of his life, he stands on Mount Nebo, looks out on the promised land, he can *see* it, but he'll never get there. At 120 years old he dies still *homeless*.

But although he was homeless, nevertheless God had been his *dwelling place*. His *tent*. So the prayer in Psalm 90 begins "Lord you have been our *dwelling place* – our tent – in all generations.

Baptism recognizes that throughout our lives, we belong on this journey *together* in the presence of God. From the young to the oldest, we all live in the same tent. For the *people* of God, baptism is the . . . .

### **Rite of Initiation**

Let's not forget that baptism didn't begin with the Christians. The Jewish people also baptized. For them, the waters of baptism signified that the person had now entered into the Exodus at the Red Sea just as surely as did ancient Israel. In baptism, they "joined" Israel on the journey. It was as if the Red Sea waters were still parted, and it wasn't too late, even now, to get in on it. You could still go through the sea and come safely out on the other side. Exodus through baptismal water was the gateway to belonging to the people of God.

And so the apostle Paul makes the same analogy with the Corinthians. Like Moses and the Exodus generation, the Corinthian believers had all begun their Christian journey with *baptism* which was just like the deliverance at the Red Sea. Paul tells the Corinthians that just like Israel, they too, are all "*under the cloud*."

What does that mean? you ask. Well the Book of Exodus tells us that as Israel entered the Red Sea, there was a *pillar of cloud* above them, walls of water on either side, and they walked through the sea with dry sand beneath their feet. And *this*, says Paul, constituted Israel's "*baptism*." An entire nation was baptized in the Red Sea that day - man, woman, and child. They were surrounded on all sides by the powerful presence of God. And Paul says that God's presence with Israel *way back then* is comparable to the Spirit's presence in the Christian community *today*. For:

They all ate the same manna.

They all drank the same miraculous water from the rock.

And that *rock*, says Paul, was *Christ*.

So in explaining life in Christ to the Corinthians, Paul is transferring the Old Testament image of the Exodus from Israel to the New Testament people of God.

So if we can come back to that old photo we began with today and the new photos we will take today that people fifty years from now will look at, we can say that not only is baptism a milestone in the life of a family, it is also . . . .

### **A Lighthouse for the people of God**

In a moment, I'm going to light a candle, to invite us to the waters of baptism. For not only does baptism mark a point in *time* on our journey, is also a constant beacon of spiritual light to guide us all for the rest of our lives. So twenty years from now, fifty years from now eighty years from now, we can look back and see how in those times when our faith is challenged, when we come to those times when we don't know where God is, or don't understand what he is doing, when we have perplexing questions, when we need to make sense out of our world, we will have a reference point. A lighthouse to aim us towards God.

So now let us come to the light. As I light this candle I invite the Huscroft family to bring Austin to the waters of baptism.