

03/22/15 - Fifth Sunday of Lent - Year B

“*Symbols of the Church: A Baptism Like Christ - Living Water*” Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Mark 10:35-45

Baptism is one of the sacraments of the church, the other being the Lord’s Supper. In our series on symbols of the church, I have emphasized the idea of *active symbols*, symbols and actions in the church that *do something to us*. I have referred to the *active symbols* of the church as *means of grace*. This is what we mean when we say symbols *do something*. They actively confer, make us aware of or help us perceive God’s grace to us.

When Jesus tells the disciples today, “*The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized*” (Mark 10:39), Jesus is saying, among other things, “*You will share with me in the gifts I give you through your baptism, which I also have received.*” When you and I were baptized, we became participants in the life of Christ; we also became inheritors of the same gifts we see in Jesus; we were adopted into the family of God. This is because something actually happens in the symbolic act of baptism.

When we began our series on symbols, I focused on the image of the Holy Spirit coming down *like* a dove. We talked about the *as if* nature of the faith life. We share in the same baptism as Jesus *as if* we were Jesus. This means, ultimately, that baptism is a big deal. Luther believed, as I do, that it should be the defining feature of your spiritual life in Christ. Our baptism frames, defines and guides our entire spiritual journey. So what we say about baptism is of great meaning. Baptism leads to important things and it is the doorway into the very depths of faith for all of us.

Peter says in the Book of Acts, “*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 2:38). The forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit are the effects of being baptized. It changes everything. Baptism is a symbol which changes lives.

When I was baptized at 16 years old, it was a profound experience. I am still trying to understand what happened on that day. For today, though, let me say this: Even though I, in good American evangelical fashion, chose to be baptized and ‘understood’ what I was choosing, as far as that is possible, I can say clearly that something *was done to me* in my baptism. I did not *do something* in my baptism. When I think of it now, my personal choice didn’t even matter. The symbolic act of baptism changed me, pushed something out of me and put something new into me, much like Jeremiah speaks of today. Reflecting on that day up on the hill behind my house in Eau Claire, the entire experience was an act of God toward me, not about my personal choice.

I tell you this only to stimulate your personal reflection on your own baptism, whether as a child or as an adult. I really, really don’t want to universalize my personal experience and tell you what to believe about baptism today. I do have beliefs about it, however, and I hope you begin to develop your own as well. The symbol of baptism

frames and changes many things, individually and as a church. Whole movements of the church are devoted to understandings of the symbol.

They swirl around a key understanding: is baptism necessary for our salvation or not? The Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Lutherans and most Episcopalians would say that, "Yes, baptism is necessary for salvation." Calvinists, of whom we as Congregationalists find our heritage, give a strong "Probably" to the question. Baptists and other Protestants say that baptism is not a necessity.

The question of necessity is answered in large part by what we believe the symbol does. Is it an active symbol that actually does something to us; or is it a passive symbol that we simply re-enact and observe as a remembrance of something the founder of our faith once did?

Think about that for a moment. What does the symbol of baptism mean to you? Did something actually happen in your baptism? Did God confer grace and the Holy Spirit upon you at your baptism; or was it an act which acknowledged an already present spiritual state? If you answer that it was an act that came after an already present spiritual state, you are in alignment with most of Protestantism, particularly evangelicals. If you believe God conferred grace upon you at the moment of your baptism, you are in alignment with the majority of Christians in the world, the Catholic and Orthodox, plus some Lutherans.

Luther believed that water was simply water and, in and of itself, had no meaning beyond what it simply is and does, until the Word of God is added to it. Only then does the water become a vehicle for God's grace. Water plus the Word of God, the Spirit of God, becomes the water of baptism. This is the water we share with Jesus in our baptism. And it is in this way water becomes a personal vehicle for God's grace to the one who receives it.

Water, in and of itself, is a powerful symbol throughout Scripture. From the opening moments of Creation, water is present from the beginning. The separation of water from land means the imposition of God's order upon the world. Think of Moses parting the waters of the sea in this way. Think of Jesus' baptism in this way: God's order being imposed upon the chaotic world.

Or, think of water as the conduit of God's grace to and for the world. This is the way the early church thought of water. Baptism in the early church was, among other things, a re-enactment of the story of Noah. The story of Noah reflects what is happening in baptism. Baptism is the suffering of a death like humankind at the mercy of waters directed by God. In the same way, we, in our baptism, as Paul says, die to the Old Adam. In the early church, at your baptism, you were held under water long enough to believe that you could actually die in this situation. Then, when you began to show signs of drowning, when you began to experience the same fate as humankind in the Flood, you were pulled out of the water, rising up out of the waters in the same way as Jesus in our story from the Gospel of Mark. In this way, you now enter the Ark of the Church, saved in the same way Noah was saved by the waters of the Flood. This is also why so many

churches, including ours, are designed to look like the upside down hull of a ship. We are riding on the seas of heaven, the waters of God's salvation.

Justin Martyr spoke of salvation by water, faith and wood. The waters of the Flood at once destroy and save in the same way the water from Jesus' side at once holds us in judgment and saves those who would believe in him. Noah's faith, against all apparent observation, saves his family from destruction, just as our faith saves us in the face of the evils of the world. And the wood of the ark of Noah saves humankind in the same way the wood of the Cross saves us by Christ's work upon it to renew all Creation.

Justin gets this from both the Book of Hebrews and Peter's first letter, where he writes, "*because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him*" (1 Peter 3:20-22).

William Willimon, the patriarch of the Methodist Church in America, says, "*Baptism means whatever water means.*" The symbol of water builds from the bottom up, from its very basic life-giving element to its spiritual truth as the "*living waters*" of Christ. At its most basic, water is the building block of life itself. When we do not have it, we die. When it is polluted, we get sick. When water is misused or becomes chaotic, it destroys.

The earth is 71% water. Of that water, 96.5% is held by the oceans. Of the remaining water, only 2.7% is freshwater. 2.7% for 8 billion people. When you and I drink from the bottles of water we have here today, when we step into our showers or baths with hot water for 15-20 minutes or so, when we mix a drink or buy a coffee, we have to realize that we are using a resource that is increasingly limited around the world. That limitation is for many reasons - overuse, drought, lack of snowmelt and snowfall, decreasing glacial melt - but it is important we understand the impact.

When I was in Arizona a few weeks ago, my parents were talking about all the water regulations that have been put in place because the Colorado River no longer reaches the state anymore. It dries up before it reaches Arizona. Part of that is a management issue. The dam which holds back Lake Meade could be opened to allow more water to flow; except that Lake Meade is not being renewed by rainfall or snowmelt. It has fallen more than 100 feet since 2000. Soon the pipes that redirect the water will be above the water line. New projects are being developed to build new pipes to access the lower water.

You and I use on average between about 160-220 gallons of water *a day*. Think about that. This does not even account for what scientists call *virtual water*. Virtual water is the measure of the water it took to grow the cotton in your clothes, to bring the steak or chicken to your table for dinner, the water lost to broken pipes and evaporation

to bring it to your house for cleaning and drinking and cooking. Then the amount of per day usage goes up to about 900 gallons. Can you imagine that? It is very hard for us to imagine because we live in such an abundant land in America here. But it isn't abundant, or safe for 750 million people in the world who simply lack access to water. Then there are the 4 billion or so who may have access to water but have no assurance of safety because they have no sewage system.

Water is *actually life giving*. When water is combined with the Word and Spirit of God, it becomes the "living water" Jesus tells the woman at the well about. *"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."* The woman said to him, *"Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."* Jesus said to her, *"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."* (John 4:10-14)

It is this living water that we share with one another in our baptism. That living water of Christ begins as water which gives life to every person on the planet. It is *as if* God were using the basic building block of life to lead the world to God's own self. We share the symbol of Jesus' baptism with one another so we might always remember to share the living waters of Christ with the world.

Sometimes that begins at the level of survival. When we see our physical survival is intimately tied with God's goodness and giving, just as the Israelites learned in the desert for 40 years, we begin to see our spiritual life is completely dependent on God's invisible grace. Baptism is the active symbol of this invisible, continuous and loving grace. It is the gateway into the community of faith and participation in the renewal of God's creation through the power of the Holy Spirit in the redemption of Jesus Christ.

In water, faith and wood we are carried on the "living waters" of Jesus Christ, and like Noah, we are the family of God awaiting the renewal of the world for all people. Amen.