

Wesley United Methodist Church

December 29, 2013

“Baptism.”

Luke 3:21-22

Before performing a baptism, the priest approached the young father and said solemnly, “Baptism is a serious step. Are you prepared for it?” “I think so,” the man replied. “My wife has made appetizers and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of cookies and cakes for all our guests.”

“I don’t mean that,” the priest responded. “I mean, are you prepared spiritually?”

“Oh, sure,” came the reply. “I’ve got a keg of beer and a case whiskey.”

This is not exactly what the priest had in mind. Was this man ready for baptism? I don’t think so. Let me give you an example of someone who was prepared.

In one of the countries on the continent of Africa, a young man of a certain village announced that he would be buried in the yard at the back of his house at 3:00 pm that very afternoon. The man appeared to be strong and healthy, but as the curious villagers gathered around his house early that afternoon, they found the young man digging a large hole in the back yard. Some of his friends had brought shovels and were helping him. After they finished the hole, the man and his friends began to carry large pails of water to fill it. At 3:00 pm the pastor came and buried the young man in the waters of baptism.

My guess is that the young man was ready. There are many forms of baptism in the Christian community, but we all agree on one thing: Baptism is the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

In the Gospel of Luke we read these words, “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and 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 how Jesus began his public ministry. He was baptized at the hand of John the Baptist. And this is how we begin our public life as one of his followers—with baptism. Our baptism is a sign and seal that we belong to Christ.

Part of the meaning of baptism is the washing away of sin. The scriptures teach, and personal experience affirms, that each of us is a sinner. It is sin that separates us from God. Baptism doesn’t mean that we become perfect, but it does mean that sin is no longer a barrier to our relationship with God.

Some of you may have seen the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. It’s a retelling of Homer’s *Odyssey* set in 1930s Mississippi. Three hapless escaped convicts—Everett, Pete and Delmar—are hiding out in the woods, running from the law. There they encounter a procession of white-robed people going down to the lake to be baptized. As they move toward the water they sing, “Let’s go down to the river and pray.” As the baptism ceremony begins, Delmar is overwhelmed by the beauty and the mystery of this rite. He runs into the water and is baptized by the minister. As he returns to his companions, he declares that he is now saved and “neither God nor man’s got nothing on me now.” He explains that the minister has told him that all his sins have been washed away. Even, he says, when he stole the pig for which he had been convicted. “But you said you were innocent of that,” one of his fellow convicts exclaims. “I lied,” he says, “and that’s been washed away too.”

Later, the three convicts steal a hot pie from a window sill. The one who felt that his sins had been washed away returns and places a dollar bill on the window sill.

Delmar wasn’t made perfect by his baptism any more than any rest of us are made perfect by our baptism. That’s why in understanding baptism we begin with the washing away of our sins.

We know who we are. We are God’s child. Baptism is not only a washing away of sin. It signifies our identification with Christ. We do not know who we are until we find ourselves in him. In our baptism we affirm that Jesus is God’s Son, and when we are joined with him, we become children of God.

Another pastor story. A pastor of the First United Methodist Church in San Diego tells of baptizing a certain five-year-old little boy. He met with the parents a week before and went over the service step-by-step, so that they all understood what baptism was all about, what they were promising, and how the service would proceed in the context of the worship service.

So, Sunday morning came and they all were there. they came to the place in worship where the pastor invited the family to come forward for the baptism. They gathered around the baptismal font: mother, father, the five-year-old and two godparents. Everything proceeded smoothly until the pastor asked the question: "What name is given to this child?" The mother and the father and the godparents looked at each other, but no one spoke. The pastor was certain they all knew the child's name, after all he was five years old. It was obvious that the question caught them by surprise and they hadn't talked about who would answer it. Just then, there was a tug on the pastor's robe and the little five-year-old's voice spoke up and said: "Pastor, you know who I am. I'm Michael." the pastor replied, "Thank God Michael knew who he was, otherwise, we might still be standing there."

By our baptism we know who we are and to whom we belong. We are God's child. Baptism is so much more than a cleansing from sin. Baptism represents our identification with Christ. Baptism is our initiation into the Body Christ. Go forth with the knowledge that you have been baptized. You are not you own. You belong to God.