Baptism Renewal

Mark 1:4-11 Kimby Young

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The second Sunday after Epiphany is designated by the greater church as “Baptism of our Lord Sunday.” The assigned lectionary passage is always the story from one of the gospels about Jesus’ baptism. This second Sunday of Epiphany is set aside to think about the sacrament of Baptism, what it means to us, and to remember our own Baptisms. We do not have a baptism today, so this is a time to think about the meaning of baptism in general – not tied to a specific child of God, but connected to all of us everywhere. This Sunday is a time to renew our Baptismal promises to God and to one another, and a time to remember God’s promises to us lived out in so many ways. If you are not baptized, the promises of God are just as true. God loves you. After the sermon, we will share a renewal of baptism ritual to remind us of God’s love. Because really, that’s what baptism is all about – God’s love.

Water runs throughout the Bible and our faith tradition. Water brings life. Water can also take life away. Always, water reminds us of the presence and power of God, who carries us through and saves us from all that threatens. In baptism, water represents that salvation of God, that grace of God, poured over us and into us, that we might live in God’s presence.

When anyone is baptized, we recognize our belonging to God. We believe in Jesus and therefore we belong to Jesus. We promise to serve Jesus and to do our best to follow Jesus in the way of love. In the ritual of baptism, we act out a little drama of death and resurrection, drowning and rising, to remind ourselves of Jesus death and resurrection. We believe that we will also rise with Jesus to new life. Jesus literally saves us from death because of God’s great love. God pulls us out of the water. God saves us from drowning. God rescues us and gives us a whole new life. And we promise to honor Jesus, living as God calls us to live. Jesus saves us by washing away our sins, taking away anything that separates us from God. Jesus unites us to God so that we belong to God forever.

This washing in baptism reminds us that we are refreshed in God’s presence. Everything is new again, because of God’s grace. It is not the water that washes us or the ritual that forgives us. Baptism is not necessary. Rather, Baptism is a reminder of what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ, and what God will continue to do for us by the Holy Spirit. Baptism reminds us of God’s free and ever flowing gift of grace.

Presbyterians believe it doesn’t matter how you are baptized – whether it is immersion under water, or sprinkling of water, or any other method. The point is the belonging to God and the salvation of Jesus. Remembering the touch of grace on your head and in your heart.

Likewise, Presbyterians believe it doesn’t matter when you are baptized or even if you are baptized. God’s grace is not dependent on our actions. God’s grace is already given in Jesus. We baptize children who are vulnerable and powerless, in order to emphasize that salvation is not about our action or our personal decisions, or our own worthiness or our willingness or our understanding. Salvation is about God’s action in Jesus Christ, God’s grace totally undeserved, God’s love poured out to all of us. In our tradition Baptism is all about God. We are as helpless as babies to save ourselves. It is God’s grace that makes us able to grow and to act as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world.

The sacrament of baptism is an acknowledgement of that grace and a call for response. We belong to God. Whether it is children baptized while parents make promises or whether it is adults who stand before a congregation and proclaim their faith, God blesses and saves.

In our Presbyterian tradition, we always have baptisms publicly in worship. We also try to have baptisms in a church that we know the person being baptized will be active – because baptism is about connection. We belong to God. We live out that belonging by being a part of a community of faith. In our baptisms, not only will the parents or the person being baptized make a commitment, but the entire congregation will make promises to support the person being baptized – to show them love and to teach them how to be faithful to God. We also take up that promise for every child of God who comes into our lives. We promise to show them love, to point them to God, to help them to grow in faith. We promise to belong to each other as we belong to God.

I think that’s one reason Jesus was baptized – publicly at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus didn’t need to be baptized. Jesus was showing us how to belong to God and to other believers. Jesus was demonstrating that connectedness and belonging of the church.

The Christian Reformers in our tradition so appreciated baptism that they encouraged daily rituals to remind yourself of your baptism. Martin Luther said – touch your forehead every time you need a reminder, remember the water falling over your head and say to yourself – remember your baptism and be grateful.

Others have said the same thing in other ways – every time you take a shower, every time you pass a body of water, every time you see a fountain, every time you take a drink of water – remember your baptism and be grateful. Remember that you belong to God, that you are loved by God, that God gives you whatever you need for renewal and new life. Remember your baptism and be grateful.

And if you are not baptized – the meaning of God’s love and grace still stands for you. God is not bound by ritual or circumstance. God loves you as you are whoever you are.

Remember God’s grace in baptism and beyond, and be grateful.

To help you in the remembering, I have a take away gift for you today – I am calling them “Pocket drop reminders.” As you came in, by the bulletins and offering plates, you should have found baskets with little clear stones that remind you of water. I invite you to take one of these little stones. Put it in your pocket, or your purse, or your backpack, or somewhere else where you will see it or touch it. And every time you see these drops, remember God’s grace poured out for you, remember God’s love in Jesus Christ, remember that you belong to God and you belong to this community. Remember that nothing can separate you from God and God’s love for you. You are God’s beloved child in whom God is well pleased. Remember and be grateful. Amen.

Mark 1:4-11;

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 his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

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.”