

Acts 19:1-7

January 11, 2009

South Plains

Baptism of the Lord

Baptism: Sign of New Times

One of the Christmas cards we received last month came from a young woman who once lived across the street from our house in Florida. She is one of these people blessed with curly blond hair and a beaming smile. Although she's older now in the picture she sent, I immediately thought of a warm morning in Florida when I was leaving for work. I was driving the church van that day so I backed out of the driveway looking carefully in both mirrors when I caught sight of this neighbor. She was heading out on her morning run. I'm sure it was her smile that distracted me. At 7:30 AM I plowed into both our trash cans with a horrible crash. When I got out to inspect the damage, she was laughing so hard she couldn't walk.

The value of a Christmas card is in the memories it provokes, memories of people important in our lives, memories of laughter, and memories of significant moments that remind us who we are. The sacrament of baptism does the same thing. At the start of the church year, shortly after we celebrate the advent of Jesus, we remember his baptism. Whenever someone is baptized, we recall other baptisms and the significance of our own baptism. I've placed the font in the center of worship today in the hope of provoking some of those memories for all of us.

Baptism is one of the oldest practices of the

Christian church, as old as potluck suppers and hymn singing. Yet, we often take it for granted, especially if the church does not have occasion to celebrate the sacrament very frequently. The font can become just another piece of furniture, a memorial to a dead person, perhaps an important person, but it may not have the power of a souvenir that reminds everyone of an important event.

But baptism is moving back into the center of church life because Christians are re-discovering its power. We pour the water more visibly and more loudly than before. Some congregations celebrate a re-affirmation of baptismal vows. It can re-invigorate our faith and re-orient our church life together. For instance, Christians who cannot agree about music and dress and videos in worship, can agree that the centrality of baptism and the Eucharist far outweigh cosmetic preferences. Doctrinal disputes move from abstract arguments about theology to concrete sharing of our faith in the renewal of our baptismal vows. Worries about church growth and evangelism – two perennial hot topics very relevant to South Plains – we now realize the growth of the church is critically related to how we understand and celebrate baptism, because this sacrament is the doorway for new members into the church.

The power of baptism is symbolized in the water. Listen to the water in our readings:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:1-2)

The voice of the Lord is over the waters;  
The God of glory thunders,  
The Lord over mighty waters. (Psalm 29)

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. (Mark 1:10)

Now listen to another story of the power of baptism found in Acts 19:1-7.

Throughout scripture, water is an important medium for God's action. The Jordan River was the gateway into the Promised Land. No wonder John began his ministry on its banks. The baptism of Jesus thrusts him into the public eye first as a follower of John the Baptist and then as the fulfillment of all John's preaching. Just as important, his baptism identifies Jesus as one of us, an ordinary human being who needs to place his life before God and live in God's grace. It was because he wanted to identify himself with sinful humanity that Jesus, who is never described as sinning, steps into the waters of baptism, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. As the Red Sea and the River

Jordan are waters of salvation for Israel's escape from slavery, the water of baptism becomes the medium for our escape from sin, the symbol of God's action to save us.

Of course, there's nothing magical or holy about water used for a baptism. The power of the visible ritual that we do in worship is the invisible work of the Holy Spirit. However the water is applied, whether by sprinkling, dipping, pouring or immersing, water represents God's Spirit doing for our souls all the things water does for us physically and emotionally. I washed my face this morning just as you did. My face didn't look especially dirty, but I knew it needed cleansing and I always feel better about myself after I've washed. Our bodies need water internally to keep blood flowing and to lubricate our moving parts. Water refreshes us. That's why we are drawn to waterfalls, rivers and streams, and why we go down to the sea.

Christians are drawn to the waters of the font in worship because our conscience needs to be washed clean of guilt. We feel better when we're forgiven. And, we need to remind ourselves of this soul-washing because the need for forgiveness pops up again and again every day. Forgiveness lubricates our interactions with others in every way, from the multiple times we cut off another person in conversation or in traffic, to the times we lose our temper in foolish anger. We don't always say, "I'm sorry" or "I forgive you," but the need for that exchange is there. In fact it's the unspoken pardon

that keeps the conversation of life going forward. And, it's the well-timed apology that gets us over the bumps and keeps us on the road. Baptism is the sacrament of forgiveness that leaves the past behind. Spoken or unspoken, forgiveness lets us move forward in life.

Baptism is also the sacrament of new life that opens up the future. Jesus begins his ministry by being baptized. Now he's ready for his life work. Now he's prepared to meet temptation. Now he's equipped for loving, healing and telling the kingdom. In the story we read from the book of Acts, Paul meets some believers who knew the baptism of John, but who did not know baptism in the name of Jesus. It would be fun to know more about those disciples: what they believed and how they behaved. But, Luke tells the story to demonstrate the power this sacrament wields in the name of Jesus.

Again, it's important to note that there's nothing magical about the words themselves or even the laying on of hands. The sacrament has power through the faith of these believers who are finally told the full story. "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus (19:4)." That's the rest of the story, the conclusion of John's ministry and the fulfillment of his message. Faith in Jesus fulfills the promise of repentance: the past is wiped clean so that the future, a new life, opens us before us.

This new life is the coming of the Holy Spirit. For these particular Christians in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, the sign of new life was tongues and prophecy. For most of us, the sign of new life is words and deeds of love. Speaking the language of love, so that other people hear our conversation as kind and supportive, is more difficult than speaking a foreign language for many of us. Speaking the language of truth so that other people hear our conversation as reliable and trustworthy is the best kind of prophecy.

I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. When you hear those words, hear them as call to speak love and peace.

The signs of new life can be surprising. A teenager discovers he can sing in the choir. A middle aged woman becomes an advocate for juveniles in the family courts, a senior citizen penetrates the crust of youth culture and discovers they like him. I remember the time I was desperate for someone to cook a Wednesday night supper for 60 people. I took a deep breath and called a woman in her late seventies for help. She agreed. The next week, she called me to say, "Thank you for asking me to do that. I wasn't sure I could do it, but I discovered I still can."

Just because we are baptized members of the church does not mean we can do anything. It does mean we will do more than we thought possible because the power is God's, not our own. One of my favorite

passages is found in the letter to the Ephesians where it says

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! (Eph 3:20-21)

Baptism is the sign of God's powerful Spirit present in believers. When you see this font, take heart. When you are discouraged about what God can do with you, remember your baptism. When you acknowledge your sin, claim the forgiveness of baptism. And, when God surprises you with a new challenge, lean on the promise of new life sealed in the waters of this sacrament, a life that is more than you can imagine.