

WGUMC January 12, 2014 Remember Your Baptism  
Exodus 30:17-21 and Matthew 3:13-17

A drunk comes tripping through the woods and happens upon a preacher who is baptizing folks in the river. So, he stumbles into the water. The preacher takes one whiff of the guy and says to him, "Are you ready to find Jesus?" The drunk answers, "Yes sir, I am." So the preacher grabs him and dunks him in the water. When he pulls him up, he asks him, "Brother have you found Jesus?" The drunk replies, "No, I haven't found Jesus." The preacher is taken aback and dunks him a second time, holding him under for a little bit longer, pulls him up out of the water and asks him, "Brother, have you found Jesus?" The guy again answers, "No, I haven't found Jesus." By this time the preacher is at his wit's end and plunges him in a third time. This time, he holds him down for 30 seconds until the guy starts thrashing around in the water. Finally, the preacher hauls him up and asks him, "For the love of God have you found Jesus?" The drunk coughs and sputters and says to the

preacher, "Are you sure this is where he fell in?"

You don't have to be drunk as a skunk to misunderstand the point of baptism. The problem is that many of us were baptized before we understood much of anything.

Other religions have a certain advantage. They have rituals of purification, too, but they perform them over and over again until the meaning starts to sink in. The short reading from the Book of Exodus talks about the bronze basin where the priests in ancient Israel would always wash before offering sacrifices in the temple. And Orthodox Jews today have a ceremony for hand washing before every meal. Muslims have a similar practice. They wash their face, hands and feet five times a day before they pray. So in their daily lives, they have daily rituals to remind them of their responsibility to come clean before God. We Christians don't get such tangible reminders. We generally baptize only once and most of us don't remember it. So it's not surprising that we don't really

know what to make of it.

Fortunately, we can look to the Bible to help us, and there we will find the team of John the Baptist and Jesus. First, John brings the water and tells us that Jesus will bring the Holy Spirit. John pronounces the judgment. Jesus gives us forgiveness. John lays down the rules. The Spirit gives us the power to live by them. The fact is that we need both John and Jesus to understand our baptism.

Because our baptismal ritual has a bit of both. John was in the Jordan River preaching a baptism of repentance. He warned people to repent, turn around, get back in line with God. Likewise, when we have a baptism, the pastor says: “On behalf of the whole church, I ask you, do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?”

That sounds like baptism requires more than just giving up our individual sins. That's hard enough, but the evil powers

also include the structural sin that is built right into the world we are living in. So, as baptized Christians trying to live in God's world, we have to question what's going on in this world. We can't just play the game. We can't try to justify the injustice or acquiesce to the evil that's committed in our name.

We have to repent on every level of our lives and give it all to God. Even when it's inconvenient. Even when it's counter-cultural. Even when respectable people disapprove. Even when our neighbors think we're nuts. This is the part of the baptismal ritual that we need to repeat each and every day.

But our baptism doesn't leave us in this constant state of judgment. Thank God! God doesn't lay down a bunch of rules without giving us the power we need to live by them. So in baptism, the pastor will then ask: "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"

God wants to give us freedom, so God forgives our sins.

God wants us not to have to drag around all that guilt and shame and grief, so we can be free to take big risks for God. And along with that freedom, God will give us the power we need so that we can in fact change the world for good.

Louise Benson was a baptized believer, a faithful Catholic, and 61 years young when she began distributing baskets of food from her home in Willow Glen. And her one-woman ministry to the needy became Sacred Heart Community Service fifty years ago this year. As a Community Action Agency, it got start-up funding from the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, part of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Today, Sacred Heart is still fighting, serving about 20,000 individuals every month. Roughly 400 families visit the food pantry every day. I don't know how anyone could call that a waste of government money.

Never underestimate what a few Christians can do when they say "yes" to baptism. As John Wesley put it, "Give me

one hundred men who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not whether they be clergymen or laymen, they alone will shake the gates of Hell and set up the kingdom of Heaven upon the earth.”

You want to know how it works? When, in the words of the baptismal ritual, we "confess Jesus Christ as [our] Savior, put [our] whole trust in his grace and promise to serve him as [our] Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races," the Holy Spirit descends on us just as it descended on Jesus. And God says to the heart of each of us, "This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

That's what God said to Jesus just after he was baptized in the Jordan River. And then the Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness where he was tempted for 40 days. But he overcame the spiritual forces of wickedness and defeated the evil powers of this world. And we can, too.

Whatever devils we are wrestling with don't stand a chance because of the freedom and power God has given us. Whatever forces are working against us are simply no match for the One who stands beside us. The brokenness "out there" cannot harm us because of the wholeness that God is putting in here.

My friends, baptism is a blessing, but it is just the beginning. As it was for Jesus. For Jesus, baptism was the launch of his mission to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. [Luke 4:18] So the baptism of Jesus, which was to "fulfill all righteousness," set Jesus on the path to fulfilling God's justice.

That path is also our path. So you could say that we remember our baptism best not by repeating it, but by living it. Yesterday, I was at our Change the World Day over at Cambrian

Park UMC. A few that I've baptized were there: Ellie, Drew, and Ollie. The two boys are too young to remember their baptisms, of course, but they were there with their families putting it into practice, running around, providing some entertainment while the rest of us were making sandwiches, baking cookies, sorting coats, and writing words of encouragement for some of our neighbors down at the shelter. Hardly past the changing diaper stage and already working to change the world!

Whether or not you remember your baptism, the important thing is to live it each and every day. That way, God will remember it and you will be thankful!