

WGUMC January 8, 2017 "Why Christian?"
Matthew 3:13-17

[Our daily Advent Devotional this last year was comprised of individual members of the congregation answering the question: "Why Christian?" I take this time at the end of the holiday season to reflect on that question myself.]

You've heard about the church that couldn't get rid of the squirrels in the belfry. They tried scaring them, trapping them, everything short of shooting them. Then one day at a ministerial association meeting, the pastor was complaining about his pesky rodents, and the Catholic priest in town offered some sage advice. He said, "All you have to do is round them up and baptize them, and I guarantee you, you'll never see them again!"

We all know that just being baptized doesn't guarantee *that* you're a Christian. But as I was preparing to baptize Natalie this morning, I got to thinking about how baptism is a ritual reminder of *why* I'm a Christian.

We typically think of baptism as a way to wash away our sins. While having sin washed away is no small thing, it isn't what compels me to be a Christian today. We also think of baptism as a rite of initiation into the Church, into God's family. And while I am extremely grateful for being adopted into the family of Christ and find a lot of love and life in Christian community, that isn't the most powerful force keeping me near the cross.

Baptism reminds me of why I am a Christian because of what Saint Paul says in his letter to the Romans. In Chapter Six, Paul says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" Now it's hard to imagine why being baptized into Christ's death would make anyone want to be a Christian. But read on: "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of [God], so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have

been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." [Romans 6:3-5]

Newness of life and resurrection sound pretty good. But do we really have to suffer to get there? Paul seems to think so. And I have lived long enough to understand that what Paul is saying is that if we want life—real life, God-filled life—we're going to have to go through a lot of death. We're going to have to die to our selves in all kinds of ways that we don't want to. And we're going to have to suffer all kinds of losses that we don't think we can live through.

Jesus certainly did. After he was baptized and came up out of the water, was claimed by God and anointed by the Holy Spirit, his troubles began almost immediately. In the very next verse, Jesus was led out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Not much later, he was rejected by his hometown and went on to be tested by the religious authorities, betrayed by his best friends and, in the end, crucified by the Romans.

But on every step of his troublesome journey, through every situation in which he suffered, the closer he got to his death, Jesus became more and more alive.

And that realization is a big part of why I am Christian. Baptism is the ritual by which we sign up for a journey that through suffering and death brings us more and more to life. I could never belong to a religion that promised that if you do certain things you can avoid suffering. I can't believe in a god who would use power to relieve some people's suffering and not others. But I can believe in a God who sees what is going on in the world and comes down into human life and participates in human suffering, even death, and is able to bring meaning and hope and new life out of it.

If we could only look upon every instance of suffering, every little death we experience in our lives, as an opportunity for something in us to be reborn. It's what I set out to do during the cancer treatment and what I have not yet been able

to do with this drug I have to take for the next several years. It has a lot of side effects and I don't like it. It makes me tired and crabby and then I don't like myself. Anyone who has ever lived with a chronic condition can relate.

The fact is that life is a chronic condition. There are a lot of side effects. And we get to a place where we want to give up our faith because we can't believe that something good can ever come out of this stupid suffering. But that is why it is so important to remember our baptism. Whether you were sprinkled, poured or dunked, on the day you were baptized the heavens opened and the Spirit came down, and as the pastor droned on, God whispered in your ear, "You are my beloved son/daughter. With you I am well pleased."

It may take us a lifetime to convince ourselves that we are loved by God. Because we suffer, we often think that God must not love us. But I have learned that it is precisely through

the suffering that we are most likely to discover how deeply God loves us.

Janet Wolf is a UMC pastor who tells a story about a woman named Fayette who came to the new member class at her church in Nashville. Fayette had a mental illness. She had lupus. She was homeless. When they got to the topic of baptism, Janet explained it as "this holy moment when we are named by God's grace with such power that it won't come undone." That caught Fayette's attention and she would ask over and over again, "And when I'm baptized, I am...?" And the class would respond, "Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold." And she would exclaim, "Oh yes!"

The day came for Fayette to be baptized and she was baptized by immersion. When she came up out of the water, she said, "And now I am...?" And the congregation cried in unison, "Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to

behold." And Fayette shouted and danced around the fellowship hall.

Not long after, Pastor Janet received a phone call. Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the hospital. When Janet arrived, Fayette was pacing back and forth and saying to herself, "I am beloved, precious child of God and...." Then she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Her hair was sticking up, blood and tears streamed down her face. Her dress was torn and dirty. She stared into the mirror and said, "I am beloved, precious child of God...and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I'll be so beautiful I'll take your breath away!" [story from *The Upper Room Disciplines*, 1999]

Looking at Natalie, it is easy to believe that she is a beloved, precious child of God and beautiful to behold. All babies are beautiful. So what happened to the rest of us? Life happened. We've been on the journey long enough that our souls look pretty beaten up. They are torn and dirty, with blood

and tears streaming down. Now, only God's grace can take our breath away. Only God's grace can ever make us believe the unbelievable: that each of us is a beloved, precious child of God and beautiful to behold.

It was long after my baptism that I finally experienced that grace for myself and could believe what I had been preaching for years: that even I was beloved. And I would never have experienced it for myself if I hadn't suffered, if I hadn't in some sense died with Christ so that I could be raised with Christ. That's what I remember about baptism, and that is why I am a Christian.