

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 12, 2020 (Baptism of Our Lord, Year A)
Matthew 3:13-17

When I look into this font, I see MORE than water. I see REFLECTIONS – reflections of the CHILDREN I have BAPTIZED in these waters.

I remember my FIRST baptism. The summer after my first year of seminary, during my CPE unit, Clinical Pastoral Education, I was working as a chaplain in a Naperville hospital, just outside Chicago. One day I was in a meeting when I was paged from the neonatal unit. I knew what that meant, and it was JUST as I had feared. A mother had gone into labor EARLY and the baby was stillborn. He was so TINY, the size of my palm. The family wanted him to be baptized, so I found a basin and some water, and I baptized him there in their room, with his family gathered around him. They hadn't even chosen a NAME for him yet, and they couldn't BEAR to do it then. I remember the feeling of AWE as I looked around the room at those gathered for his baptism. I named him "child of God," choking back my OWN tears. I sprinkled water over him, baptizing him in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

(Lift the water, as in baptism, letting it splash 3 times)

It was a SACRED MOMENT in which we all shared.

I see reflected in these waters so many MORE baptisms. I remember a baptism in a LAKE in North Dakota. The family had a cabin where they wanted their baby baptized, and they invited EVERYONE in the church to come. Now, in North Dakota, lakes aren't as plentiful as they are here. I drove an HOURLY to get to their cabin, but to my surprise and delight, most EVERYONE who had been in church that morning had made that SAME drive. They ALL wanted to be a PART of that special moment. And so, with the congregation gathered on the shore, and the pontoons of their neighbors churning past, the family and I waded out into the water, and we baptized their precious child.

(3 splashes)

I see reflections of ADULT baptisms I have done. There's something INSPIRING about an ADULT baptism. It's a joyful celebration that recognizes the TRANSFORMATION that happens in our lives as we COME to faith, and LIVE in it. It's even MORE poignant when an entire FAMILY is baptized TOGETHER.

I see reflections of the baptisms of my OWN children. THEY certainly don't remember the events – they were only 3 months old. But they're LEARNING the story of that day, from their PARENTS and their GODPARENTS.

I see my OWN reflection in the waters of baptism as well. Now, you should know that I wasn't a CHRISTIAN when I was young. I was NOT baptized as a baby, but I didn't KNOW that. I didn't REALIZE it until I was preparing for seminary. They asked me the DATE of my baptism, and I didn't KNOW, so I asked my PARENTS, and they said I didn't HAVE one. So I was baptized as an ADULT.

And what I REMEMBER about that day is that something extraordinary happened in my life. The fact that I AM baptized fills me with sheer wonder. To know that God has RECEIVED me as God's CHILD is a source of ENDLESS joy and comfort. That day I became a member of the Body of Christ. It was the BEGINNING of a life-long journey of discovery about God, but also about ME. It AMAZES me to think that God SAYS about me, "Here is ANOTHER one of my BELOVED children".

So what about YOU? What do YOU see reflected in the waters of baptism? I want us to take a few minutes to think about that question. Find a partner, not your spouse (that's cheating) and answer these questions: What do you know about your OWN baptism? Is there ANOTHER baptism you have witnessed that was memorable to you? Why? What does baptism MEAN to you? Go ahead, I'll give you 2 minutes, and then we'll switch.

(Allow 3 minutes for discussion.)

I bet you had some great stories. ALL of that, everything you have experienced, everything you remember, everything you FEEL about baptism, everything you KNOW about baptism, it's ALL gathered into THESE waters. God's Spirit MOVES in this water and makes it HOLY, to make YOU children of God.

When I meet with families before a baptism, I tell them that WHEN we baptize, the Communion of Saints gathers around us. That Great Cloud of Witnesses, EVERY Christians that has EVER lived, and every Christian there ever WILL be, JOINS in celebrating the washing of our sons and daughters, the NEW BIRTH we experience in baptism. When a child is baptized, their great, great, great grandparents, long gone, are HERE to welcome them into the family of God. And their great, great, grand-CHILDREN cheer them on. We may not be standing in a river, but these waters are MOVING.

So what DIFFERENCE does it make? What DIFFERENCE has your baptism made in YOUR life? Retired Presbyterian pastor John Buchanan tells of baptizing a two-year-old boy in a Sunday morning worship. After the child had been baptized, Pastor Buchanan, following the directions of the Presbyterian prayer book, put his hand on the little boy's head and addressed him like this. He said, "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever."

And unexpectedly, the little two-year-old boy looked up and shouted, "Uh-oh."

The people in the congregation smiled, of course. But, the pastor later wrote that the child's response was APPROPRIATE. He called it a "stunning theological affirmation" from the mouth of a child.

Because the boy was RIGHT. Baptism IS an "uh-oh" kind of event. It should NOT be a mere rite of the church that we do without some DEEP SOUL searching and prayer – whether it's OUR baptism or the baptism of our children. Whether we're two years old, two MONTHS old, or even 102 years YOUNG, baptism should NEVER be taken lightly.

It's is an "uh-oh" experience, because there are CONSEQUENCES to baptism. We are redeemed, restored, and reconciled by the Spirit. We are called to follow JESUS, and he gives us the SAME task of being a light to the nations, of opening blind eyes, of bringing prisoners out of bondage, of feeding and clothing the poor and hungry. ALL the things we heard about in our other readings. We are called to SERVE God. We are called to BE Christ to our neighbor, in a broken and needy world.

Which, of course, brings me to the FINAL reflection in these waters of baptism. For reflected here, in ALL his glory, I see the face of Christ. We stand on the banks of the Jordan where JESUS was just baptized.

And what God the Father says to HIM, he says to ALL the baptized of EVERY time and every place, EVERY ONE of us, EACH of YOU: "THIS is my CHILD, my Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased."

(3 splashes)

YOU are God's BELOVED.

You are LOVED.

And God is PLEASED with you. Amen.