

*The Baptismal Font – January 19, 2010 – The Baptism of the Lord
Ezekiel 36: 24-28; Ephesians 2: 1-10; John 1: 29-44*

First of all, let's immediately get to the first passage that we heard this morning - the passage from Ezekiel.

“I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness; and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you; and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove from your body the heart of stone and I will give you a heart of flesh. You shall be my people and I will be your God.”

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If you needlepoint, let me suggest that you needlepoint this passage on a pillow in letters large enough to be easily read and then place that pillow on a chair so that visitors can see it when they come to see you.

If you quilt, quilt this passage and then hang the quilt in a prominent place. If you work with wood, make a sign with this passage and hang it up in your garage. If you write music, make a song with these words; and if you can type or even write with a pencil and a pen, then type or write this passage on a piece of paper and keep that piece of paper in your wallet or your purse within easy reach...

For this passage from Ezekiel is nothing less than the Biblical foundation that plainly says that it is not just the water that it is at work when we are baptized; but rather, it is the Holy Spirit that is at work - that God can wash us thoroughly clean with just a sprinkling - and that it is not required that we be dunked or dipped or immersed or submerged in order to be saved.

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Now, before you think I'm simply trying to be clever or that I am taking a not-so-gentle swipe at our Baptist brothers and sisters, I want you to know that I am serious about this and how serious I am.

What happens at baptism is the work of God in our hearts and in our entire lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not a hoop to jump through. The depth of God's work is not measured by the amount of water in the pool. And any argument that suggests differently is man-made, is not biblically sound, and, in fact, puts far too much emphasis on what we are supposed to do and gives insufficient attention to God's amazing grace.

You can sprinkle, you can dunk, or you can pour – in the book of Isaiah there is a Biblical foundation for pouring. **Do what you like.** In my ministry, I have done all three.

But know that it is the Holy Spirit working with you and in you at that moment; and that however much you think that at that moment you are making a decision for Christ, you might want to consider that Christ is actually deciding for you.

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The message this morning is about baptism. Today is the day that we remember and reflect upon the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, an event that is recorded in all four Gospels.

And the passage from John's Gospel that we heard this morning makes it abundantly clear: John baptizes with water; Jesus the Son of the Living God baptizes with the Holy Spirit - and with that event, we are thoroughly and immeasurably changed.

Friends, with baptism, we are not joining a club. This is far, far more than some initiation. We are given a new heart. We are given a new spirit. Whether we are sprinkled or poured upon or dunked, we are marked as Christ's own forever. We are given rules to follow and boundaries to respect; and they are God's rules and God's boundaries – not the world's rules. And in this event of baptism, God claims us as our own.

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In the letter that Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, Paul reminds us that we once were dead as a consequence of our sins and our sinfulness - that we once lived in and operated in and followed exclusively the rules and the ways of the world...and that we were trapped and burdened and broken by our sins and by the ways of the world and that we were once painfully separated from God, the source of our life and our being.

In this letter, Paul calls us “children of wrath.” I like that phrase. It vividly and unapologetically describes the ways that we make decisions in our lives when God is absent from our lives - when we have pushed God away...

Our desires are disordered. Our priorities are upside-down. Our appetites are out of control. Our relationships with others are incomplete and unresolved...

We are all at once tentative and timid and withholding in our expressions of love for others. We are all at once mired with grievance, resentment, anxiety, distrust, and needfulness in our day to day dealings with friends, family, and loved ones. We are all at once manipulative, hurtful, passive-aggressive, self-serving - and in the end, lonely... in the end, lost from God... in the end... at the end of the day... separated from all that is good and meaningful and true.

In short, Paul tells us, we are a mess. But then Paul quickly adds, if we are a mess, we are like all the rest - all the rest of the world who have made the decision to live solely by the ways of the world.

Without God's grace, without God's transforming power in our lives, we are a mess like all the rest, but, thanks be to God, God has rescued us, God has found us and redeemed us, God has claimed us and God has called us his own.

This is what happens when we are baptized. We move from death to life. We move from struggling with fear to knowing God's peace. We move from leading lives of quiet and not so quiet desperation to leading lives of faith and courage. We move from lives where we are painfully separated from God and others to a life of fellowship and community and love.

In today's passage from Ephesians, Paul says it best... “God, who is rich in mercy, out of God's great love for us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, has made us alive together with Christ.”

Every one of Paul's words here is important, is essential: God's love; our broken condition; our new life in Christ; **our new life together.**

“By grace you have been saved through faith,” Paul tells us. “It is not our doing,” Paul adds. “It is God’s gift to us.” Baptism is God’s gift to us so that we who have been lost from God may have a new life in Christ... together.

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Let’s, just for a moment, conduct a brief inventory of our church building and all or at least much that is in it.

We are sitting in a place called the sanctuary – a word that means a place of safety, a refuge, where God’s grace and righteousness is the sole mediator. This room is also called the nave, from the Greek for ship or boat, for we as a faithful people are always moving forward together.

The area where I am standing is called the chancel. The place from where I preach is called the pulpit, of course, but it is also called the ambo, a Greek word that means “mountain” and that name comes from Isaiah 40, verse 9: “Get up to a high mountain and bring good news to the people. Lift up your voice with strength.” So the word “ambo” describes what I am called to do.

In front of me and in front of you is the altar table. Altar is a word that means sacrifice. Table refers to fellowship. We observe the sacrifice that Jesus made for us by gathering in fellowship at His table.

These cloths over the altar table are called paraments. The one covering the pulpit is called the antependium. The colors of these cloths signify where we are in the seasons of the church. Today we are observing the baptism of Jesus. Next Sunday, we observe the second Sunday of Epiphany and the cloths are green, which means that we are in “ordinary time,” a time when we remember and reflect upon the life of Jesus.

There is often a little step or shelf in the back of the altar table to put the cross, the collection plates, flowers, and candles. This little shelf is called the retable. Ideally, the pastor when he or she is serving communion should be standing behind the altar table, inviting the congregation - and not facing away from you

What all of this inventory should tell you is that in church there is a place for everything and there is a name for everything and everything has its place and everything has a purpose.

Somehow, we have forgotten that. We may no longer know why there is an altar rail or why the colors on the pulpit change throughout the year. We call the item of clothing that a child wears during or after baptism a christening dress or gown, forgetting that its true name is chrisom, meaning that the child is now clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

And what about the baptismal font, the place where we sprinkle or pour? In modern church life, we treat the baptismal font in much the same way as we treat the leaf blower or the snow shovel at our homes. We want it near enough to us just in case we might need it - knowing that we won’t need it all that often - but not so close as to get in our way. If we even have a baptismal font, we usually tuck it away somewhere in the rear of the chancel, mostly out of sight.

It wasn't always that way.

Back in the day - and when I mean back in the day, I don't mean a hundred or two hundred years ago when this church was founded... but rather I mean over 1800 years ago when the Christian faith was just beginning and just beginning to find its footing... Back in that day, the baptismal font was not the forgotten pushed in the corner piece of furniture that it is today. Instead, it was placed at the very front of the church. You could not walk into this sanctuary without coming face to face with the baptismal font.

Why was that so? Because back in that day, baptism meant something. It meant moving from death to new life. It meant that you were changing your allegiance from living by the world's way to living by the Word, by God's ways.

Back in that day, before you could become baptized, it took forty days of study, prayer, reflection, and examination – not only of what you knew about the faith but how you were living out the faith. This time of preparation was done during Lent – and only if you progressed faithfully during those forty days were you baptized into the Church on Easter Sunday.

Nowadays, it takes next to nothing to join a church. You show up; you answer a few questions that are printed in some book... If you haven't been baptized, we the clergy may sprinkle or pour water over you or dunk you in a pool or river. **And that's that.** In fact, it may be more difficult to become a member of Ruritan or some of the health clubs in this area than it is to become a member of a local church.

And it takes even less to remain a member. Your membership in church becomes a little like having squatters rights. You've been a member. You've stayed a member. Your name is on the rolls. And nothing you do and nothing that you neglect to do or refuse to do will ever get you off the rolls. You don't have to lift a finger. You don't even have to be a decent or even a civil person. Once you're in, you're in.

It wasn't always that way.

Back in that day, you simply couldn't live a double life, with one foot in and the other out of church and still be a member of church. Back in that day, you were held accountable for what you said and did.

Nowadays, we have long stopped forgiving each other's sins and shortcomings and have long been in the habit and practice of explaining and enabling them. "You know Joe... that's how he is and will always be... He'll never change" we say... and so Joe continues to be rude and hurtful and selfish, while a church member in good standing.

"You know Joe... You know Dick and Jane... and Jack and Jill... and Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice"... They'll never change."

Have we forgotten so quickly?

“I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness. A new heart I will give you; and a new spirit I will put within you. You shall be my people and I will be your God.”

God, through the power of the Holy Spirit - and with some water delivered in some way - **changes lives - completely**. Why have we decided that all of a sudden God can't change the lives of those who sit next to us or in front of us in the pews?

Back in the day of the Early Church, when you were baptized you stood before the congregation and told us both what you had come to believe and how your life had changed since experiencing the unfailing love of Jesus Christ. Back in that day, when you had sinned – either inside or outside the faith – you stood before the congregation and told us what you had done, how you were sorry, and how you promise to never do that again.

Can you even imagine something even remotely like that occurring in this or any other church in these days? Our sinful ways, we have come to believe, ain't nobody's business but our own, even if they do hurt each other, even if they do damage the church. And so we revolve around each other like well-oiled ball bearings and accommodate each other's ways – until in time this part of the church where we are sitting becomes no longer a sanctuary but a snake pit and becomes no longer a place where we move forward in faith but rather ends up a shipwreck sinking fast.

Can you even imagine something even remotely like people being held accountable for what they once professed at their baptism? I cannot. And in some ways it is probably just as well. We cannot turn back the clock and I am surely not suggesting that we do.

When people stopped confessing their sins – an act which is simply sharing the details of your faith journey – with the entire congregation, they began to bring their struggles and their faith story to pastors and priests. That was in the 4th century and the Irish invented it – and it became the first instances of not only Christian counseling but any counseling at all. But nowadays we're too private and perhaps a bit too proud for all that.

Perhaps we have forgotten what God can do in our lives. Perhaps we are too focused on wanting God to do what we want God to do.

We've put the baptismal font as close to the attic as we can. We've forgotten the meaning of the Christian calendar and so are left with only following the world's calendar – in January we diet and exercise... March is for March madness; April we pay our taxes; sometime in summer we take a week or two away... September the kids are back in school. October we trick or treat - and so on and so on.

And in the process, the local church has lost some of its power to bring the good news and be the good news.

For that is why I am here this morning: to stand up before you at this pulpit, this ambo, this high place... and to tell you this good news - **God changes lives**, that, as Paul tells us in the passage that we heard this morning: "We are what God has made us to be, created in Christ Jesus for good works."

And this too is the good news... **By grace we have been saved.**

So... be sprinkled with this good news... Allow for this good news to be poured all over you... Immerse yourselves in this good news. Remember your baptism and be thankful. For God is good, all the time.
Amen.