



BAPTISM AND RENEWAL

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*(Baptism of the Lord –
First Sunday after the Epiphany)*



NEW HOPE

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**Lectionary Texts: Genesis 1:1-5;
Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11**

Genesis 1:1-5

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the 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.

³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Acts 19:1-7

¹While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ²He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” ³Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” ⁴Paul said, “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.” ⁵On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—⁷altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The Message: Baptism and Renewal

Our readings today are each about beginnings. Whether it is one of the two creation stories as told in Genesis, the revealing of Christ through Baptism as told in Mark, or Baptism in the Name of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the Acts reading...There is a common thread.

Beginnings come in many shapes and sizes. They represent “life”. The Hebrew understanding of “life” is growing closer to God, and “death” then is growing distant from God. And there is yet another constant among our readings...a common element with deep significance. That common element is water. God’s wind blew across the chaos of the deep waters at the beginning of the creation story in which God gives a beginning. Jesus emerges from the water of the Jordan and God initiates a new creation...a new beginning. And those baptized in the reading from Acts have a new beginning rooted in water as well...they begin a new chapter of life in their baptism. That is still true for us today. The waters of our Baptism hold a powerful recognition that God loves us and claims us as his own. They give us new life...new closeness to God.

All these things give us a wider view of things than the rather narrow biological definitions we use for life and death today. In fact, when we see and hear through the eye and ears of the early Christians, we can acknowledge that in our own lives there have been many moments of death (moving away from God) and renewed life (moving closer to God).

That explains why we experience very real grief over losses that are not biological death, and it explains why we sometimes feel the need for joy and faith to be restored...you may recall that the scriptures sometimes refer to the need to be born anew. The truth is it wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to see these experiences as small deaths and resurrections- at least in the spiritual sense. It is obvious that God is at work in us and through us in the here and now. We believe the physical resurrection is yet to come, but living into the kingdom begins now.

In our best moments everyone can see that we are alive. Our closeness to God shows in our faces, our body language, and our actions. We really live out the Love of God and Love of Neighbor that we speak. These are the times we Christians strive for and long for. But, in our weak moments...and we all have them...we don’t feel quite as close to God. That shows, too. Does this mean that we are bad people? No! It means we are human. And ultimately it is our humanity that seeks to find peace and meaning that can only come from a renewed closeness to God.

According to Mark, John said, *“The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.”* We know that John’s baptism was for the repentance of sins. It prepared the way for a new start through the Messiah who was coming. Many wonder why Jesus, the one without sin, would submit himself to it. After all, it was not a requirement of Jewish law for him. But Jesus put himself right in there with the other Jews responding to John. He chose to place

himself in the same context as all the others. Perhaps it had something to do with preparation for what was yet to come.

After all, it was when he came out of the water that Jesus saw the dove and heard the words, “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” Many presume that everyone saw and heard this, but in this passage only Jesus saw and heard. The affirmation was to him. It is John who proclaimed the power and authority of Jesus, and it is the Spirit that gives confirmation. In Jesus, we see both authority and humility...reminders to the church that we still need both as well.

And then in our Acts reading the Apostles expanded this baptism to gentiles. They also expanded it to Baptism in the Name of Jesus...complete with the representation of the Holy Spirit. They paraphrased John, saying, “*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. On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.*”

We have talked on other occasions about the tradition of Baptism in the Methodist Church, so I won't dwell on that this morning. But, I do want to emphasize one or two things.

First, we believe that everyone regardless of age, faith, location, or anything else is under the Prevenient grace¹ of God. Everyone! So, when we present ourselves or an infant for Baptism we allow God to claim us in a visible and public way. It is not about us claiming God, but about God's claim and love for us.

That said, it is a time when we begin to move from Prevenient grace to Justifying grace². It is a new beginning. This is important in many ways, not the least of which is this. The Sacrament of Baptism is far more than a one day event. It is not a box to be checked off to claim a place in a better world when we die. No, Baptism is a continuing covenant with God to be a kingdom builder - beginning now. As N. T. Wright³ says of belief in the resurrection, “It isn't that, like suicide bombers, people who believe...are more cheerful about dying for the cause because they are happy to leave this present world and escape to

¹ *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* (2004) defines prevenient grace as "...the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will, and our 'first slight transient conviction' of having sinned against God. God's grace also awakens in us an earnest longing for deliverance from sin and death and moves us toward repentance and faith."

² Verses 2 Corinthians 5:19 and Romans 5:8 demonstrate the justifying grace of God. They point to reconciliation, pardon, and restoration. Through the work of God in Christ our sins are forgiven, and our relationship with God is restored. According to John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, the image of God—which has been distorted by sin—is renewed within us through Christ's death.

³ Nicholas Thomas Wright is an Anglican bishop and a leading New Testament scholar. He is published as N. T. Wright when writing academic work, or Tom Wright when writing for a more popular readership. His books include *What St Paul Really Said* and *Simply Christian*. Wright was the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England from 2003 until his retirement in 2010.

the glorious future. It is, rather, that people who believe in the resurrection, in God making a whole new world in which everything will be set right at last, are unstoppably motivated to work for that new world in the present.”

In order to live in that way, some of our personal desires and habits must die. These things must die so we can “live”. It is true that Baptized believers have already been claimed by God, so it is not appropriate to repeat the sacrament. But it is appropriate for us to re-visit the covenant made with God, whether we made it ourselves or it was made on our behalf as infants. It is appropriate to renew covenants, because we are human and frail. We still need new beginnings. We still need chances to “live” closer to God through the Holy Spirit.

And so, this morning I invite you to participate in the Baptisms of James-Kegan and Heather Yezdanian. You will be asked to re-affirm your commitment as well...and you will pledge to help instruct and raise them in the faith. And then, I invite you to join me this morning in a Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant. You will have an opportunity to come forward...touch the water...and perhaps you will choose to make the sign of the cross on your own forehead. However you participate this day I invite you to join me in a new beginning on our journey with Jesus...a journey of radical love.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

Amen!