

“The Memory of Baptism”
Text: Mark 1:1-11, Acts 1:38-39

Rev. Barbara A. Frey

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Baptisms are one of the most enjoyable parts of ministry for me. These are special moments and they are quite a blessing to be a part of. Baptism, like Communion, is a sacrament, which means it's not all about the words. The two sacraments are “outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.” In other words, the sacraments are ways of embodying the grace of God, making it tangible, real in deed, not just word. In the waters of baptism, in their sound, in their touch, in the ways we gather in networks of human relationships around the font as individuals, families, and communities of faith, we experience the grace of God in action with our whole bodies in a way that words alone cannot convey.

The Bible has a word for special moments like this, called “kairos,” which means fulfilled time. Special moments like the coming of Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah and Savior; like the long awaited birth of a new child into the world, special moments like today's baptism. This is ordinary time that has been filled with a rich meaning. The meaning of this special time shapes and orders the rest of ordinary time.

As I was talking with Karen and Scott in preparation for Kayden's baptism this morning, it occurred to me that there was another major player in the liturgy with whom I had not talked: you, the congregation. You, also, are an important participant in this sacrament. First, you promise to support and help these parents in the faith nurture of their child. Secondly, you reaffirm your own baptism. Hearing the liturgy—the special words of baptism again today, you remember that these words are also about you and your relationship with God, with Jesus, with the Holy Spirit.

This morning I would like you to remember your baptism. I wonder how many of you recall the day, the events, the pledges.

I can remember many baptisms performed, but I don't remember my own baptism or at least not its day. But I do know some facts about my baptism because my parents have shared them with me. They explained why they waited until I was a year old. And they told me that the three of us left church quickly afterward because my Dad had a sudden, unexpected malaria attack. Despite all the stress and emotion on that day long ago, my parents were joyful and happy about their decision and that I was finally baptized. The meaning of having me baptized and welcomed into that church family was a happy memory. The meaning of baptism shaped their memory.

Today we have water; we have a baby, let's explore together what's going on. So many of us have come to this congregation and to the larger United Church of Christ from someplace else, some other Christian tradition, or no Christian background at all, and, it's been a while since the rest of us were in Sunday School, that it serves us well to pause every once in a while and reflect on just what this is all about. In the UCC we say that “God is still speaking,” so just what is God saying through the sacrament of baptism?

Because meaning does shape memory, this insight can help us better understand the significance of what happened to Jesus in the Jordan River. This is a good place to begin our story of baptism. John the baptizer appears in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People from the city of Jerusalem and all Judea flock to him, and are baptized by immersion in the river Jordan, confessing their sins, being washed clean, and being made right with God. John is doing God's work—God's disciple. John was not so neat; not so clean; his appearance was wild; but in lots of ways, he was an ordinary person. He demonstrated the spirit of inclusiveness to all the persons coming to him. John provided a much-needed spiritual service. But John is not on a power trip and is really clear about that as he proclaims, **“The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”**

When we look at the actual events that occurred at the Jordan, we see a variety of emotions. There's gratitude for the gift of forgiveness. Surprise and shock at the sight of the baptizer's appearance. Certainly there's some confusion about the identity of the powerful one who is coming after John. So the experience of John's ministry is a jumble of emotions.

All of this changes when Jesus comes on the scene. **God chooses** this wild-looking guy to baptize his Son, Jesus Christ. John is **included** and doing something wonderful. As Jesus is coming out of the water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven says, **“You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”**

This is the meaning of baptism: Jesus is God's Son, the Beloved. Gone is the jumble of emotions, replaced by deep joy that God has revealed his Son, announced his love, and proclaimed just how pleased he is with Jesus. Jesus is now, for us, the Word of God in human form. We know of Jesus' saving ministry and how he embodied the good news of God's kingdom of love, justice, and peace for all people.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, when the time had come for him to pass on this ministry to his disciples, he also passed on to them—to us the tradition of baptism, charging them in the Great Commission to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 29:19)

So, the story of the early Church, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, is the story of baptism—the mass baptism of those Jerusalem crowds under the influence of the wild Pentecost spirit; the intimate roadside baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch; the converting baptism of Paul and the boundary-breaking baptism of a Gentile Roman, soldier Cornelius and his household, where Peter was led to exclaim in exaltation and a little exasperation, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47) In baptism, the spreading church did not bring God with them but witnessed to what the Spirit of God was already doing in the lives of people near and far and welcomed them into the growing community of the body of Christ.

Then and now, the meaning of baptism and knowing Jesus' true identity as God's Son shapes our memory of baptism.

As we remember our own baptism, we, too, are connected to the body of Christ—the universal community of Christians. In remembering our baptism, we are connected to the presence of Jesus in the world today. In this sacrament we also become children of God, no less loved than Jesus Christ himself. The meaning of baptism shapes our memory forever.

Although, in the UCC most churches baptize in a manner similar to our church, there are some that baptize by immersion. Persons of all ages can be baptized, but infant baptism is very common. In the baptism of an infant, like Kayden, we lift up and celebrate the fact that she, like us, is beloved and that someone watches over, takes care of, and helps her and us to find the way before we are even aware of it. In baptism we know the grace of God—God loves us without reservation, whether we deserve it or have done anything to merit it—God is for us and with us.

How God is present in the water and the words and the welcome is sometimes difficult to grasp. In fact, the word “sacrament” means mystery in Latin and there is a mystery to baptism. And so, even though we may not understand just how God is present in the water and the words and the welcome, somehow we know God is.

A 12-year-old boy was baptized and his school friends quizzed him about it. Did you hear God talk? NO. Did you see a vision? NO. Well, then how did you know it was God? The boy thought for a moment and then said: “It’s a lie when you catch a fish. You can’t see or hear the fish, you just feel it tugging on your line. I felt God tugging at my heart.” (AHA, Jan. 13, 2002)

Baptism helps shape our life together in faith. It is for this reason that Scott and Karen brought Kayden before God in this community this morning, to help shape their life together as a family of faith within this larger family of faith and to ground their life together in grace.

And so this morning I invite you to remember and imagine your baptism. I invite you to remember that you are God’s beloved child, chosen by God in love before you were born, before you yourself could choose for good or ill. I invite you to remember and imagine that your whole being is grounded in the wild and powerful grace of God that knows no bounds, that flows through the world nurturing and naming us, washing our wounded lives, joining us in covenant community, and raising us to new life in Christ.

Wherever you are on your faith journey, recognize that our baptism affirms that we are children of the living God, the God who is well pleased with us. Wherever we are on our faith journey!

Indeed, God is still speaking through baptism, and so I invite you to touch the waters of baptism and remember and imagine...and believe.

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