

Remember Your Baptism  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

“By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) “This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God.” (1 John 4:9-10 Msg.) This is the firm foundation on which our faith is built. Our faith, itself, is a gift from God. Our very life is a gift from God. We have nothing in which to boast.

Today we celebrate the baptism of the Lord Jesus and remember our own baptism. We're going to remind ourselves of just what it means to be baptized into Christ, and what a wonder it is that the God who created heaven and earth and all that lies therein has called us children of God, joint heirs with Christ. It's a love hinted at throughout God's history with the people of Israel and come to fullness in Jesus Christ.

Baptism is, first of all, a sacrament. A sacrament is a visible sign of an inward grace. Visible sign we know—visible, of course, means something we can see. And a sign points to something beyond itself. Traffic signs tell us something to do. Stop, yield, don't pass. The sign points to the action that we should take. This past week, we got a prediction of snow which then appeared. The meteorologists read the visible signs. The signs pointed to snow. A farmer knows by visible signs on the land when to go out into the fields without the risk of getting stuck. Signs are all around us and we learn to read them depending on what we need to know at the time.

Again, baptism is a sacrament, and a sacrament is a visible sign that points to something that God does. When we learn what a sign means, then we know what action it points to. It no longer needs explanation. According to the Presbyterian Mission website, baptism is “dying and rising with Jesus Christ; pardon,

cleansing, and renewal; the gift of the Holy Spirit; incorporation into the body of Christ; and a sign of the realm of God.” (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/a-complete-baptism/>) These insights are gathered together from various places in the New Testament, where the New Testament writers explored what this new life in Christ truly meant and how it came about.

The sign of baptism points to all of these actions of God. With traffic signs, or weather signs, or signs of a muddy field, we might read the signs wrongly or even miss the signs. We might not perform the right action even with the signs right in front of us. But God is faithful. In the sign of baptism, we are assured of God’s action.

A visible sign of an inward grace. I grew up in a church which practiced believers’ baptism. That means you can’t be baptized as an infant, but only as a person who is ready to claim their own faith in Christ and make a commitment. It felt very strange to me the first time I saw a baby baptized. I knew, of course, that some churches did baptize infants, but I wasn’t sure how to understand it. I had been raised in a church that emphasized the repentance and the commitment made in baptism—something like the baptism preached by John. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

I can still see the reasoning behind that understanding of baptism, but when I was called into the ministry by God, I was a part of a church that practiced infant baptism. At that point, it became important to me to study the case for infant baptism. If I could not affirm that infant baptism was truly valid, then I had no business being a minister in a church where I would need to baptize infants. The difference can be summed up in the difference between a sacrament and an ordinance.

Churches which solely practice believers’ baptism may call it a sacrament, but they treat baptism more like an ordinance—like a commandment. The understanding and the commitment of the person being baptized are an important part of what takes place. An infant understands nothing and can make no com-

mitments. If understanding and commitment are what matters, then infants should not be eligible for baptism.

Now, there are some fallacies with this understanding...I was eleven or twelve when I was baptized. We had completed some kind of membership class—similar to a confirmation class. Supposedly I understood what kind of commitment I was making. But when I look back, I understood very little of the Christian faith. I understood very little of the commitment I was making. I understood barely more than what an infant understands. If understanding and commitment are an important piece of a valid baptism, then who is really eligible for baptism? I hope that we are all still growing in our understanding of life in Christ. I know that each and every one of us has fallen short of the commitment that we have made.

If baptism is an ordinance, then the understanding and commitment of the person being baptized are crucial—at least a bare minimum of understanding, which we can measure to a certain extent. I don't know how to measure commitment to see if a person is ready for baptism. Sometimes people even feel a need to be baptized over and over in case they did something wrong the first time—maybe they didn't understand enough, maybe they weren't really committed enough.

Baptism, however, is not an ordinance but a sacrament. Again, a sacrament is a visible sign of an inward grace. Since baptism is a sacrament, the knowledge and understanding and commitment of the person being baptized have no bearing on their eligibility for baptism. Baptism is a visible sign of what God is doing and what God has already done.

When we baptize an infant, we see clearly that salvation depends on God's action alone—not on our own understanding or our own commitment. We are wholly dependent on God's grace, just as much as that babe in arms. We recognize that God has known us and called us from before the time we were born, as expressed in Psalm 139. "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderful-

ly made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.”

Jeremiah had that experience when he heard God saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” (Jeremiah 1:5) Or as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.” (Ephesians 1:3-8a)

My friends, God loved you before you were born. He loves you this day, whether you are able to understand it or not, whether you are able to believe it or not, whether you are committed or not. God loves you and calls you his own son, his own daughter. Baptism is a sacrament, a visible sign of what God does within. It is not a visible sign of your commitment to God. It is a visible sign of God’s commitment to you.

I will conclude with these words from the Presbyterian Mission website: “We Presbyterians emphasize the covenant aspect of baptism. When we baptize infants we emphasize God’s gracious movement toward human beings, connected to us, through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

“The most profound articulation of this covenant understanding of baptism can be heard in the words of the French Reformed Church baptismal liturgy:  
Little one, for you Jesus Christ came into the world:  
for you he lived and showed God’s love;  
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary

and cried at the last, “It is accomplished”;  
for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;  
for you he ascended to reign at God’s right hand.  
All this he did for you, little one,  
though you do not know it yet.  
And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled:  
“We love because God loved us first.”  
(*Book of Common Order*, Church of Scotland)

“God loved us first. That is what we hold dear. Whether with a believer or a child, baptism enacts this enveloping love of God—the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, who comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit, a love that will not let us go. That is the story of Scripture, and that is the story of baptism, whether an infant in arms or a saint who is finally at rest.” (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/a-complete-baptism/>)