

Remember Your Baptism  
Romans 6:1-5  
April 24, 2022  
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

On this Baptism Sunday, as I reflect back on my ministry career, I've done a lot of memorable baptisms. I once baptized a lady in her mid-80s who was baptized as a teen but wanted to remember the experience as she got close to the end of her life. I baptized a lady who was eight months pregnant, and secretly wondered if I had performed an adult baptism and infant baptism at the same time. I've baptized a father and son on the same day. I baptized a holy terror of a youth who ended up being an Eagle Scout, although I don't take any credit for that.

Does baptism have that kind of power? Can it change an evil spirit into an Eagle Scout? Baptism is one of the most meaningful and controversial practices of the Christian church. There are multiple understandings of when to do it, how to do it, and what it means when it's done. The Bible is crystal clear in some areas and frustratingly vague in others. Our own denominational tradition has tried to sort things out, but we are still left with widely different views that serve to distinguish between different kinds of Christians instead of uniting them together.

Our denomination practices a specific type of baptism called "baptism by immersion," which means we hold people under water until they give their lives to Christ. But we accept and recognize all forms of baptism. I'm really thankful for that. Otherwise, I wouldn't be standing in front of you as your pastor, because I was baptized as an infant in the Catholic Church.

That's always been a bit of sore spot for me. My struggle started when I went to a friend's baptism while growing up. After his baptism, the preacher invited everyone to come forward to the baptismal. He then dipped his hand in the waters and made the sign of the cross on each of our foreheads, and quoted Martin Luther's line: "Remember your baptism, and be glad." And that upset me, because I couldn't remember my baptism, and I felt cheated out of this important experience. I wanted to give my life to Christ, I wanted to make the conscious choice to believe, but that decision had been made for me, and there was nothing for me to remember.

But our memories of our actual baptisms are only tangential to the power of the act, because baptism is symbolic of something much, much deeper. We are taking an inward belief (a desire to commit our lives to Jesus Christ) and expressing it outwardly by being baptized. In a sense, baptism is confirmation of our inward belief, that we are God's children. That's what Jesus experienced when he was baptized. The dove descends, and he hears the voice of his Father stating, "You are my son, with whom I am well-pleased."

While it may seem weird that Jesus would be baptized – after all, there were no sins to wash away – I believe Jesus was making this kind of confirmation. He was simply expressing outwardly and publicly what he already knew inside, that he was the son of God. Not only does his baptism make a public statement about how essential it is to be baptized, but it confirms who he is and what he is called to do. It's an authentication of his identity as the Messiah and the son of God. But Jesus' baptism is more than just a confirmation. It's also an adoption and a calling. In essence, God is saying, "Here's who you are, and here's what I want you to do," and He gives Jesus the Holy Spirit to accomplish that in the form of a dove.

And it is through Jesus' baptism that we know who we are, as well. Paul reminds us in Romans that, through baptism, we die, just like Christ died. We don't literally die, although there have been a few rambunctious youth I may have held under a second or two longer than others.

We die to our old self, our sinful self, our self that has forgotten that we are called to be children of God. But we don't stay dead. When we come out of the waters, we rise to our new self.

This was played out in the movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" These three escaped convicts come across a group of people in the woods who are wearing white robes and singing like angels. The convicts follow the people and realize they are heading to a river for a baptism, so one of the convicts gets in line. After he gets dunked, he tells his friends that the minister told him after he was baptized that all his sins had been washed away, including the time he stole a pig and got caught. His friend says, "But you said you were innocent of that." "Well, I lied...and that's been washed away, too!"

To be baptized is to be simultaneously judged and redeemed. When we are baptized, we confess the sin that lives within us and are sentenced to death in the water, only to be resurrected and redeemed into new life by God. Author Nick Taylor writes, "The water of baptism is the amniotic fluid of the Kingdom of God. As the child emerges from the mother's womb into a totally different world, so a newly baptized person emerges from a world of sin and death into a world of grace and truth."

Through baptism, we are fundamentally changed, we are marked for life. Baptism means our life is no longer ours; it now belongs to God. We are given a new identity, we are claimed fully and completely by God. Notice, in the baptism passage, as Jesus came to be baptized no one knew who he was. No one was calling him the Messiah, he had no disciples following him. But when he came up out of the water, God gave named his new identity: You are My son, whom I love.

Through our baptisms, we are named as children of God. We are claimed by God as God's own. Does this mean we'll always remember that? No. Does it mean we'll always live our lives with this in mind? Unfortunately not. But it is true, nonetheless. This not a promise that gets revoked. You are a child of God, God's own beloved. We can renounce it. We can ignore it. We can run from it. But we can never, ever change it.

Do you remember the scene in "Toy Story" when Buzz Lightyear realizes he is not an authentic Space Ranger, but just an insignificant, plastic toy? He thinks he's not unique, that he's just one of a million mass-produced products that all look and act the same. His cowboy friend Woody consoles him by saying, "You must not be thinking clearly. Look, over in that house, there's a kid who thinks you're the greatest, not because you're a Space Ranger, but because you're a TOY! Because you're HIS toy!" Then Buzz lifts his foot and looks at the bottom of his shoe. Written there, in permanent marker, he sees the name of his owner: Andy. The name of the one who loves him is written on him forever. Through baptism, God writes his name on us, claiming us as God's own, marking us as God's most loved creation with whom God is well-pleased.

So through baptism we are claimed, but we are also called. We come up out of those waters a new person with a new purpose. Paul says in Romans, "We were therefore buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Through our baptisms, we are made clean and anointed to serve. Whether we are ministers or mathematicians, accountants or attorneys, stockbrokers or stay-home moms, pilots or professors, consultants or cashiers, God has placed a call on our hearts through our baptism, a call to live a life of service to God and love for others. We are identified as God's beloved, and sent to do holy work in this world. Because of our baptism, we are made new, and that fact should influence every thought and decision in our life.

So we are called to remember our baptism and be glad. I used to resent that phrase, because I can't remember my baptism. But I don't think Luther meant to remember the act itself. I think he meant to remember the meaning of the covenant made and then live your life as what you have been claimed to be: a child of God who has died to sin with Christ in his death and been raised to new life with him through his resurrection. If you have been baptized, rejoice! You are a new creation, you have God's name written on your heart in permanent marker. And nothing can take that away from you.

But we forget so easily, don't we? We forget that we are claimed and called, and instead live as if we are still controlled by the sin within us. We say hurtful words, we make bad choices, we live selfishly. We forget. But today, I want to encourage you to remember. Remember your baptism and be glad. Remember that God said, "You are my child, with whom I am well pleased." Remember that, at some point in your life, you made promises or promises were made on your behalf that inextricably connects you to the God of the cosmos, the God of the ages, the God we know through Jesus Christ. You are God's child, and God is so very pleased with you. Remember your baptism, and be glad!