

“The power of water”
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Isaiah 43: 1 - 7

1 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
 Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers,
 they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 and the flame shall not consume you.
 3 For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
 I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
 4 Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you,
 I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.
 5 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east,
 and from the west I will gather you;
 6 I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold;
 bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth--
 7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and
 made."

Luke 3:15-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning
 John,
 whether he might be the Messiah,
¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful
 than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.
 He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather
 the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."
¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.
¹⁹But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife,
 and because of all the evil things that Herod had done,
²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.
²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was
 praying,
 the heaven was opened,
²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from
 heaven,
 "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life: which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world.¹

That's what it says about baptism in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

And It's correct. And good. Baptism is this, but it's more, isn't it.
Much more.

You only have to look in the faces of parents,
in your faces,
when there is a baptism here, as happened a couple of weeks ago, to know
that baptism is so much more than any paragraph can describe.

That more begins, for me, in the words we heard from Isaiah this morning.
Words about the relationship God creates in these waters.
And it hinges all on the central point of that text from Isaiah, verse 4a.

Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.

That's what God says to us in Baptism.
That we are God's.

From before we are born and until our baptism is complete in death, we are God's.
Because we are precious in God's sight. And God loves us.

Baptism is when we take these words off of the paper and place them into our lives,
to define us,
encourage us,
and lead us.

Anne Lamott says²:

Most of what we do in worldly life is geared toward our staying dry, looking good, not going under. But in baptism, in lakes and rain and tanks and fonts, you agree to do something that's a little sloppy because at the same time it's also holy, and absurd. It's about surrender, giving in to all those things we can't control; it's a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched.

Because you are precious in God's sight, and honored, and God loves you,

God. Who created us.

¹ Chapter 28 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 1*. Viewable online: <http://index.pcusa.org/NXT/gateway.dll?f=templates&fn=default.htm&vid=pcdocs:10.1048/Enu>

² Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*.

Who sent Jesus to live among us,
 and who is the Holy Spirit, still in this place.
 God who does all of this, calls us to get drenched.

God's love,
 the power of water, goes with you.
 And as we go, that water changes us,
 like the river that forms a canyon.

Reminding us that we are not alone, when we pass through the river and walk through the fire.
 We are not alone.
 The power of water.

Martin Luther King, Jr. knew about the power of water.³
 In the speech given the night before he was assassinated,
 he told those listening, and those who continue to listen:

We aren't going to let any mace stop us. We are masters in our nonviolent movement in disarming police forces; they don't know what to do. I've seen them so often. I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle there we would move out of the 16th Street Baptist Church day after day; by the hundreds we would move out. And Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth and they did come; but we just went before the dogs singing "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round." Bull Connor next would say, "Turn the fire hoses on." And as I said to you the other night, Bull Connor didn't know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn't relate to the transphysics that we knew about. And that was the fact that there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. And we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were Baptist or some other denomination, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been sprinkled, but we knew water.

And we just went on before the dogs, and we would look at them; and we'd go on before the water hoses, and we would look at it. And we'd just go on singing, "Over my head I see freedom in the air." And then we would be thrown in the paddy wagons, and sometimes we were stacked in there like sardines in a can. And they would throw us in, and old Bull would say, "Take 'em off," and they did. And we would just go on in the paddy wagon singing, "We Shall Overcome." And every now and then we'd get in jail, and we'd see the jailers looking through the windows being moved by our prayers and being moved by our words and our songs....

Martin Luther King Jr. was man, a child of God like you, children of God.

He was a part of changing the world, because he knew the power of the water of Baptism.

³ From "A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.," edited by James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1986), p. 281"

Because you are precious in God's sight, and honored, and God loves you.

More recently, but still six years ago, Mark Schloneger, pastor of North Goshen Mennonite church wrote an article for the *Christian Century* entitled, "Altar Politics." In it, he said⁴:

I don't know when it happened exactly, but at some point the most important event on my calendar for November 6, 2012, was not the presidential election. At some point, the unrelenting political advertisements, the carefully crafted robocalls and the irrepressible news accounts lost their power to elicit my fears and hopes or even capture my attention. I began to believe that the most important thing about November 6 was that the church would gather for communion.

Three months before Election Day, two friends and I began a project called Election Day Communion.... We plunked down 20 bucks and created a website to communicate this simple invitation: Join us at the Lord's Table on Election Day to remember, to give thanks for and to witness to our faith in Jesus.....

At first, we set a goal of having 100 participating congregations. At one point, we were adding 100 congregations per week. By Election Day, 899 congregations, schools or groups—in 50 states and 25 denominations—had indicated their intention to gather for communion on Election Day.

On November 6, photos and reflections began trickling in from services across the country. Some ministerial associations offered citywide communion services in public settings. Congregations of different denominations worshiped together. Christians in Washington, D.C., gathered by candlelight in the National Mall to pray, to sing hymns and to celebrate a memorial quite different from the monuments nearby. In Lexington, Kentucky, people brought warm clothing to a homeless shelter before gathering for worship. Friends and families met in homes, and students, faculty and staff came together at colleges and universities.

When we sang "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less," [at my own church] we were reminded that our future depends not on the outcome of an election but on what has already happened in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We reflected on the Beatitudes as both a description of the kingdom in which we place our citizenship and a vision of where the Holy Spirit leads God's people..... In the days that followed, numerous people commented how they experienced healing by celebrating unity in Christ while openly acknowledging differences. Friends with passionate political opinions told me that they decided to keep their televisions off after our service. For some reason, they said, they could wait to hear the outcome of the election.

I don't know when it happened exactly, but it did happen. When I saw a campaign button, I thought about preparing for communion. When I heard a politician call for my vote, I heard Christ's call to the table. When I felt my hopes

⁴ Mark Schloneger, "Altar Politics: Sharing Communion on Election Day,"

The Christian Century, December 10, 2012.

<http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-12/altar-politics> Retrieved January 10, 2013.

and fears being manipulated to gain my vote, I remembered the bread and the cup. I don't know when it happened, but I have a good idea how it did: the power of Christ through his church was transforming the world.

I don't remember my own baptism.

Like so many Presbyterians I was baptized as an infant,
"without undue haste, without undue delay."⁵

I've heard about it,

but what I've learned about Baptism, truly,
hasn't come from the sharing of memories or reviewing pictures.
I've learned by experience.
Over the years.
Along the way.

Through the dedication of Sunday School teachers who
stuck with us throughout middle school and high school,
teaching stories and modeling faith.

The community of The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
who took a seminarian who was from a different place,
a different world, really, Charleston, South Carolina to New York City
and saw in me a child of God called to ministry.

Through the casseroles, notes, hymns, and prayers
of those who gathered around my family in 2006, not once or twice,
but three times in six months as we gathered for funerals.

The countless witness of families who have welcomed children,
nurtured friends,
and looked to scripture for how to live
instead of looking to scripture to affirm the way they lived,

Not because it advantaged them,
(in fact usually it meant that they had less money, time, and energy)
but because it spoke to something bigger than themselves,
a truth that was larger and a grace that was deeper.

The songs of church goers in Haiti,
rising in jubilation on a Sunday morning just a few months after the earthquake
just three years ago.

Not because they were content with the status quo,
but because they knew that God was walking with them.

⁵ <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/sacraments-baptism/>

Through the water. Through the fire.

As I've seen people walk through the darkest valley and
come through on the other side,
a journey they could not have made on their own.

Witnessing those who welcome Jesus Christ for the first time,
and seeing a visible change in their life and in their spirit.

The love of God that does not give us what we deserve,
instead surrounding us with grace.

Baptism has changed my life and continues to move me outside of myself.

How has it changed yours?

How have you experienced the waters of Baptism?

Because you are precious in God's sight, and honored, and God loves you.

It may be helpful to know that the verses just before our reading from Isaiah this morning are
decidedly less joyful.

The people whom God loves are described as
deaf and blind and disloyal to this God who still seeks them.

And we know what is ahead for Jesus.

In His baptism the Holy Spirit does not make Jesus the son of God,
it empowers him for ministry.⁶

How did Jesus have the strength to go where he needed to go?

To be such a transparent witness to the love of God?

The waters of Baptism. The power of the Holy Spirit.

Because you are precious in God's sight, and honored, and God loves you.

In good times, when there is much to celebrate.

In bad times, when it can be hard to see anything through the fog.

Because through God, in baptism, we are more than ourselves.

And so it does for us. These waters.

The power of this water that baptized Jesus.

That baptized two infants here in this church just before Christmas.

This river in which we all stand.

This water is powerful,

and it is a power shared with all of us,

built on the truth that we are precious in God's sight, and honored, and loved.

You are precious in God's sight, and honored, and God loves you.

Amen.

⁶ Fred Craddock as referenced by Brian P. Stoffregen in his exegetical notes on Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22.
<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke3x15.htm> retrieved January 10, 2013.