

Baptism  
Genesis 1:1-10 & Luke 3:1-17  
November 20, 2022  
First Presbyterian, Luling

Communion is the sacrament that sustains us, over a lifetime of discipleship, when we waver and when we walk surely and confidently in the way of Christ. It becomes familiar to us, the sacrament we participate in over and over. We talked about it first, because we started this small sacraments series on a communion Sunday. But in a lot of ways, it would have made sense to talk about baptism first. It's the sacrament that marks the beginning of our discipleship journey, one that we experience only once. Baptism is the other of the two sacraments we recognize as Presbyterians, and it meets the same definition as the Lord's Supper: an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. It uses the ordinary element of water to make visible God's grace, just as God uses ordinary humans to act in the world.

We begin our worship services each week by pouring water in the baptismal font, to remind ourselves of our baptisms, that Jesus has claimed us, and that Jesus has given us a purpose, as a community of faith: bringing people to the celebration of Christ.

Like communion, the sacrament of baptism is rooted and grounded in the foundational stories of the Israelite people. We read from the creation story, of the Spirit or breath of God hovering over the waters, an image that the baptismal liturgy picks up on, as it requests through prayer that the Spirit come over the waters of baptisms, similar to praying for the Spirit to come within the elements of bread and cup at the Table.

Lots and lots of Old Testament and New Testament stories involve water. The Promised Land, like our own, or really more like West Texas, is a land where water is scarce and precious. It's easy to appreciate water as a gift of God, and so stories featuring water were precious stories. Connections with baptism are sometimes easy to make and sometimes a little more obscure. Here's a quick tour.

Noah's ark and the flood. The new beginning for humanity after the flood is similar to the new creation that we are made into in baptism.

Crossing of the waters of the Red Sea, the Exodus from enslavement in Egypt. Again, a new beginning and delivery from slavery, like the deliverance from sin.

Once they were in the wilderness, you may remember a story where the people need water in the desert, and Moses strikes a rock. Water immediately gushes from the rock, providing physical salvation in the wilderness. Similarly baptism is a sign of spiritual salvation in the wilderness.

A less well known story of Naaman the Syrian, who is cured of leprosy by immersing himself in the Jordan River seven times. A person, not even one of the chosen people, who is liberated by immersion in the waters.

In the New Testament, besides the stories of John the Baptist baptizing all kinds of people, including Jesus himself, we remember the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, where Jesus offers her water that will gush up in her to eternal life. The water that Jesus gives means that we will never thirst. That living water is the waters of baptism.

And, easier to follow, there are multiple stories of people receiving baptism in the book of Acts. The Ethiopian eunuch, Lydia and her whole household, and many others.

I think I'm safe in saying that baptism was the unifying sacrament of the early church. They were serious about people preparing themselves for baptism, with instruction and examination and preparation, often throughout Lent, for baptism at Easter.

We talked about communion having themes of thanksgiving, celebration, remembering, forgiving, and belonging. Baptism incorporates many of those same themes and a bunch more. Rather than working through all of those themes, I want to come from a different angle. Baptism is a sacrament where the work of the Trinity is clearly visible. We can see the work of the Triune God as Father, Son, and Spirit, in the sacrament of Baptism.

God as creator is the author of the covenant. Baptism is rooted in the covenants created by an always-faithful God. Creation, flood, exodus, as we've seen, were all occasions for renewal of the covenant. Baptism is a sign of those covenants, a testimony to God's faithfulness and God's grace. Here is the reason Presbyterians don't baptize more than once, or re-baptize someone who was baptized in another tradition. Baptism is not a sign of our faithfulness, but of God's faithfulness. Baptism is not a sign of our faithfulness, but of God's faithfulness. Re-baptizing, then, would claim that God's grace and faithfulness had somehow been counteracted by human sin. God is always faithful, even when we are not.

Baptism is also a sign of union with Jesus Christ. The first baptismal fonts that were built specifically for that purpose, so not a river or lake or some natural

body of water, were built in the form of a cross. The person being baptized would descend into the water and then be raised out of it by the one performing the baptism. This was all meant to symbolize participation in Christ's death and resurrection. Baptism was dying to the old, pagan life and being raised to a new life in Christ. We've lost much of this symbolism, but it's a powerful idea.

Being unified with Christ also means being joined with the body of Christ. Galatians reminds us "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." We hear there the union with Christ and the union with Christ's body, the church. It's easier to be unified with some of our siblings in Christ than others, but if we take baptism seriously, then that union is real.

And the role of the Spirit, finally. That same Spirit who hovered over the waters at creation, the same Spirit who descended on Jesus like a dove at the Jordan River, that same Spirit who came to the believers on Pentecost, that very same Spirit is present at our baptisms, too. We receive gifts of the Spirit to be used for the church and for the world.

I regret that we don't often have an occasion to celebrate the sacrament of baptism here. Remembering our baptisms each week, and all they meant, and all they continue to mean, is a good and faithful practice. Remember your baptism, and be glad. Amen.