

KEEPING A PROMISE

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, October 16, 2016

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Theme of Baptism Is Water

Prior to baptism, there is a long prayer in the minister's little black book. If you were to compare that prayer with others, you would find that there are versions for the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterians, the Methodists, the Baptists, the Episcopalians, and so forth. There are remarkable similarities all across the denominations, including Orthodox and Roman Catholic, all of them.

The prayer mentions the water of creation, and so the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters at the very beginning of the Bible. It mentions the flood of Noah. It mentions the children of Israel fleeing the Egyptians and going through the parted Red Sea. Some of the prayers also comment that Jesus had a nighttime discussion with Nicodemus, in which Jesus says that a person must be born of water and the Holy Spirit.

Most of the prayers mention John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River. Less commonly, there's mention of the woman at the well, and there's also Jesus washing the disciples' feet at the end of his ministry.

The common theme of all these references throughout the scriptures is of course water. Being involved in every one of these moments, what we have here is a sacrament using water.

Sacrament throughout the denominations has a technical definition. It is an outward and

visible sign of something that is otherwise inward and invisible. The outward portion of it is plain as day. It's water, which then invites the question of what's going on inside? A baptism is a kind of bath on the outside — a minor one, to be sure, although there's no soap. But what's happening on the inside?

First Passage, Acts 8: Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

To try to answer that question, to make a stab at it, I'd like to draw your attention to three Biblical passages: The first is the one that Judy Giblin read for the scripture lesson, Acts 8:26-40.

The story begins with a very wealthy eunuch who is responsible for all of the treasure of an Ethiopian queen. As a Jew, he has traveled all the way from northern Africa to Jerusalem in order to worship at the temple there.

Heading home in his chariot, he meets up with a traveler named Philip, and they begin talking. The eunuch is reading text from Isaiah 53, which is the suffering servant's song. The passage is frustrating because it doesn't say anything of what they talked about. It's simply that the Ethiopian has been worshiping in Jerusalem. He's been riding southward on the road to Gaza. He's been reading this particular passage, and he doesn't understand it.

The two men have an interesting conversation, no doubt. It then concludes in the eunuch finally asking, having heard the story from Philip, “What’s to prevent me from being baptized?” Well, nothing. They looked down, and there’s a stream right below the road they’re on. So down they go, and Philip baptizes the Ethiopian. Then, without further ado, Philip is caught up and goes off to another town. The eunuch heads homeward.

That’s it. No interpretation at all in the passage. However, the implication is that, upon hearing and understanding the Christian message, it is very natural to be baptized.

Second Passage, John 3: John the Baptist Baptizes Jesus

The second passage is from John, Chapter 3, in which John the Baptist baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River.

Now, it is true confession time for me. If you were to google “Decent UCC Baptism Sermon,” as I did, the heavens parted, I heard angels singing, and one of the responses to that google search was actually a decent baptism sermon.

It is a miracle, and I would like to quote from it. To give due credit, Vicki Kemper, who is pastor of a UCC church in the Carolinas, is preaching on the John 3 passage about the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan.

She writes a few paragraphs worthy of your time:

“[The] Jews were living under a Roman military occupation that treated them as nothing but subjects and then forced them to pay for the privilege in taxes to Caesar. Most of them were living in poverty, and virtually all of them were living under the religious

legalism of fundamentalist leaders, who, in an effort to save the Temple and some semblance of their Israelite identity, had made more than a few deals with their oppressors [the Romans].”

So here you have a Roman occupation and morally compromised fundamentalized leaders.

“These were people searching for a way out, people hungry for a Saviour, people filled with expectation and an almost desperate hope that maybe, just maybe, this wild preacher out in the desert [John the Baptist] was the one whose coming they had been promised — the Messiah.

“So desperate and hopeful were these people — who included priests, landowners, and the religiously observant — that they were willing to make a long journey to the Jordan to have a religious extremist call them sinners and hypocrites and ‘broods of vipers,’ and warn them of a horrible fate unless they changed their ways. Oh, how they hoped he was the one! And so they listened and winced in recognition and then waited patiently in line so they could confess their sins, get baptized in the river, and be forgiven.

“These desperate people kept coming, more and more of them, until John the Baptist had a band of followers, and his fame spread all across the country, even to King Herod [who eventually would have his head].”

She then writes more in the sermon. She talks about the conversation that Jesus and John

the Baptist have. She talks about the way in which, after the baptism, you hear a voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

And then Kemper makes a comment that really caught my attention. This is why I read you that quote. She writes that Jesus went under the water a carpenter; he came out of the water the Son of God, the Messiah.

Personally, I don’t think this is completely true, but it’s true enough to earn our mindfulness: Jesus went under the water a carpenter; he came out of the water the Son of God, the Messiah. That is the power of the sacrament of baptism.

Third Passage, Ezekiel 36: Ezekiel Turns from the Outside to the Inside

The third passage is Ezekiel 36, the most obscure one of all. Buried in the prophecies of Ezekiel — this is the Fifth Century or so before Christ — he wrote, “Thus saith the Lord, I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses. I will take out of you the heart of stone and I will put into you a heart of flesh.” He uses this image of sprinkling clean water upon the people to mean something far more profound.

This prophet is not at all describing something outward. He’s not evoking people as dirty and dusty with body odor and grease. No, their uncleannesses were definitely on the inside. Ezekiel uses the image of a bath, a shower to change what is on the inside, transforming a heart of stone into a heart of flesh.

In other words, there is a sacramental, indeed an archetypal, image buried in the prophecies of Ezekiel.

So whether it’s Phillip and the eunuch or John the Baptist and Jesus or little Brodie and First Congregational Church, we are tapping into something universal and ancient. Through the sign of water — water that is common, universal, physical, and obvious — God promises to cleanse us on the inside.

Let me say that one more time: Through the sign of water — and we all have our experiences with water — through that sign, God promises to cleanse our souls on the inside.

Whether literal or not, the world was cleansed in the flood of Noah. The Israelites were cleansed of their slave-masters, the Egyptians, and the destitute and occupied Jews flocked to the Jordan, confessing and repenting, seeking to be cleansed again on the inside. And while at it, they wanted to be cleansed of the Romans.

This Now Brings Us to Brodie

Let me tell you a story that I’ve never before told you. It happened about twenty years ago, and it was a sort of vision. I was baptizing a baby boy, maybe two or three months old, a tiny kid. I was holding this little boy when something strange happened.

First, you should know that for the actual baptism my normal practice is to hold the baby face down so that water doesn’t get in its eyes. But on this occasion I hadn’t yet flipped him over. The tiny tyke was still face up and I was reciting the liturgy prayer, when suddenly I looked at his face, and he no longer had the face of a baby.

He had the face of an old man! I was shocked! I closed my eyes, blinked really hard, and looked at him again. It was still the face of an old man. Not much hair; it was gray and straggly. Deep folds of wrinkles

covered his face below his sunken eyes. He had the visage of an old, old man.

I blinked a second time, looked back at this child, and he had the perfect face of a baby again. My best understanding of what had happened was deeply shocking to me, and I had difficulty continuing the service. But the way in which I have understood this vision is that the promise of God that we remember and highlight when we have a baptism is not just for a baby. It's for a lifetime. It's for the whole of our being, all of our days.

So now, let's talk about Brodie for a moment. The promise is that, through the Holy Spirit, God will cleanse us, the whole of us, the whole of our days.

But now look at Brodie in particular. He will encounter many, many opportunities to do something, to say something that has the potential to stain his soul.

ssHow old do you think he will be when he tells his first lie? Something breaks. Erica runs into the room. "Did you do that?" "No, the dog did it."

When will he be tempted to raise his fist against another kid on the playground? I pretty much guarantee it. Do you know of any child who has never been tempted to cheat on a test? It's universal. Will he be tempted by another person after he's married? Maybe. In the business that he founds someday, might he be tempted to use creative financing?

In other words, this little child will be subject to all of the temptations that are common to humanity. Every last one of them. And what this promise of God is saying is "Not to worry, I've got it covered."

Yes, Brodie is the child of Colin and Erica. But he is also a child of God.

Amen.