**“Remember Your Baptism”**

Mark 1:1-11 Rev. Clinton G. Roberts First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest January 9, 2022

Like many of you do, Deb keeps a very important folder in her filing cabinet holding critical identification documents such as copies of our driver’s licenses, passports, Social Security cards, birth certificates, and these: our Baptismal Certificates.

This is a copy of my own, and it certifies that on Oct. 9th, 1955, when I was nine months old, my mother and father presented me for baptism in the United Church of Fayetteville, NY where Dad served as pastor. Dad didn’t baptize me: the certificate is signed by the Dr. Henry P. Van Dusen, President of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, one of Dad’s teachers before the War and the architect of the World Council of Churches following it. I’ve got an old black & white picture capturing the event: Dr. Van Dusen is holding me in my white gown as my whole family, dressed in their Sunday best, looks on. It appears in the photo that I am thumbing my nose at the minister, which is never a good idea when the baptism being celebrated is your own. Somebody very important must have been watching, because now, I’m the guy in the black robe holding the baby, which reminds me of a couple of lines from Robert Frost: *“Lord, forgive my little jokes on Thee, And I’ll forgive Thy great big one on me.”* Don’t thumb your nose at the Minister: you just might end up becoming one!

I

So which document in your ID file do believe is most important? Your driver’s license? People ask for it every day, and without it, you can’t drive a car. How about your passport? You don’t want to lose that. How would you get back to the USA without it? How about that birth certificate? With that, you have the means to replace all your key documents. Your Social Security card? People guard that with their lives.

But I’m going to do my best today to persuade you that out of all of these documents, your Certificate of Baptism is the most important one of all.

So what exactly is baptism—and what is its significance to believers?

David Gambrell, who works in the Office of Theology and Worship for the PCUSA, writes this:

*“The practice of baptism is, in some ways, incredibly simple: washing with water in the name of the triune God. A few words and a handful of water are the only essential ingredients. At the same time, baptism represents…our full immersion into the new way of being. It plunges us into a pool of meaning and mystery deep enough to swim around in forever, with implications that ripple out into every aspect of our lives.”*

The Gospels begin and end with baptism. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus presented himself to John the Baptist at the beginning of his own ministry, and while he did not personally baptize anyone, he commissioned the Eleven after his resurrection in Matthew’s Gospel to “*go out into the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Mt. 28:16ff). So beginning with his, and extending to ours, the act of baptism becomes like bookends. Everything essential about our faith is contained between them. It is the beginning of the promise—and the fulfillment of it, too. It was no happenstance that Jesus chose to begin his ministry by submitting to the baptism of John. He began with the end in mind. And at the close of his earthly ministry, he commissioned his followers to do the same: to the ends of the earth and the close of the age.

But here is the question: if Jesus was *“tested as we are, but without sin”* (Heb. 4:15), as it states in the Book of Hebrews, why did he ask John to baptize him?

II

John the Baptist is the key intermediary between the Old Testament and the New. He was a prophet after the manner and mission of Elijah, proclaiming God’s word from the wilderness, outside the corridors of power in Jerusalem: the Temple, controlled by Caiaphas and his family; the Sanhedrin, and the court of King Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Judea and Galilee. John came to all these people and was rejected by them, so he took his ministry into the wilderness. In the waters of the Jordan, he offered a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins because the Messiah was coming, the thong of whose sandals he was unworthy to untie. He was preparing a way in people’s hearts for the coming kingdom of God. All four Gospels confirm that thousands of people from Jerusalem and throughout Judea came down to the River to be baptized: even the Scribes, the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

But then Jesus came, the stranger from Nazareth. In two of the Gospels, John does not initially recognize Jesus for who he was, but in the First and Fourth Gospel, he does. Seeing him approach along the riverbank through the rippling heat-waves, in the Fourth Gospel John says, *“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”* (Jn. 1:29). It doesn’t get clearer than that. In Matthew’s Gospel, John says to Jesus, *“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”* (Mt. 3:14). But in all four Gospels, John bears witness to the theophany that occurred at Jesus’ baptism: when the heavens were opened, and the Spirit descended like a dove, and a Voice was heard saying, *“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased”* (Mk. 1:11).

So why did the Christ, the Son of God, submit to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin? The answer lies in the words of Jesus himself. According to Matthew, Jesus said to John, *“Let it be so now, for it is fitting for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness”* (Mt. 3:15). Here then is the key to unlocking the mystery of why the Sinless One submitted to a baptism meant for sinners. He didn’t do it for his own sake. He sank into these waters for us. He did it *to fulfill all righteousness:* the righteousness of God’s sovereign purpose to redeem a fallen creation through the advent of his Son. *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you…they shall not overwhelm you…for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior”* (Isa. 43:3). Now we see the promise offered in our own baptism, which Jesus freely chose to give: *“I am with you always,”* he promises (Mt. 28:20). He shares in our living and dying as we share in his dying and rising. The waters of our baptism through the work of the Spirit seal us in God’s grace. We are united with Christ—and we belong to each other as well. The same Voice that said, *“You are my Beloved Son”* claims each of us as beloved children of God. Through the promise of our baptism, we are becoming new persons altogether, members of one Body, the Church, with a glorious inheritance prepared for us set forth from the beginning of the world. Indeed, as Paul resoundingly affirms in the Book of Romans, *“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? For I am convinced that neither death nor life, things present or things to come, not the powers of this world or anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Rom. 8:37).

That is an incredible promise: which is why, when we celebrate the funeral of a Christian, we cover their casket with a pure white cloth symbolizing their full immersion into Christ’s death and resurrection—their baptism which is now complete. This is what Jesus clearly had in mind when he asked John to baptize him in order to *“fulfill all righteousness.”* He had you in mind that long-ago morning. And he had me.

III

Some people ask me, *“Pastor, if my baby dies, will she be accepted into heaven if she hasn’t been baptized?”* My response is to reassure every parent that God loves their children far more deeply than they can ever possibly imagine; that God knew their children even before they were conceived; that Jesus himself said *“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them”* (Mt. 19:14); and that the Sacrament itself is an “outward and visible means” to an “inward and spiritual truth.” The Sacrament of Baptism embodies our acceptance of the promise. It is an act of faith. Its power rests in the action of the Holy Spirit to seal us in the life of Christ forever.

Some people ask me, *“Pastor, what about people who get baptized as infants but grow up to be pretty unfaithful people—even people who deny altogether their belief in Jesus Christ?”* I must respond, *“That doesn’t mean Jesus Christ ever stopped believing in them. Stopped loving them. Stopped forgiving them. Again and again and again.”*  The Bible states that *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Rom. 3:23). No exceptions. But here lies the promise and power of our baptism: in Christ, God never stops loving us. There is nothing we can do—or not do—that can ever change that. Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness. It started with a baptism. And it ended with a cross. Because he came to the water, all the blessings of his baptism now wash completely through your own. You are not alone in this world. Your life is no longer just your own. Through the promise of your baptism, you belong to Christ. And Christ has chosen you. Think about this:

* When you face sickness, trouble or sorrow—you will never face them without him;
* When the ceiling of your world comes crashing down around you ears, he will be there to help you pick up the pieces;
* When depression or anxiety turns your mornings grey and your afternoons leaden, Christ will shine like a lamp for you in the gloom. He will say, *I see your suffering. I am here with you.*

What an incredible gift it is to remember our baptism. We may place great value in our driver’s license, our passport, even our Social Security Card—but there is something of far greater value sitting in your ID folder: something maybe we all should be hanging up next to our cherished diplomas:

*I have been baptized. I belong not to myself but to my Savior, Jesus Christ. I too am a child of God.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.