

“The Mystery of Baptism”
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[Mark 1:1-11](#)

A mother was at home with her two young daughters one afternoon. Everything seemed to be just fine until the mother realized something strange. The house was quiet. And as every parent knows, a quiet house in the daytime can only mean one thing: the kids are up to something.

Quietly walking into each of the girls' rooms and not finding them there, she began to get worried. Then she heard it: the sound of whispering followed by the flushing of a toilet. Following the sound, she soon realized where it was coming from. It was coming from her bathroom. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush. Poking her head into the room, she was able to see both of her daughters standing over the commode. Whispers, flush. One of them was holding a dripping Barbie doll by the ankles and the other one had her finger on the handle of the toilet. Whispers, flush. Wanting to hear what her daughter was saying, she slipped quietly into the room. And this is what she heard: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole you go.” Flush.

These little girls were a bit confused about baptism, but we must admit, many of us are, too. Baptism is a complex issue, and it's often a controversial one. Those of us baptized in Presbyterian churches – or Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Catholic, or many others – were probably

baptized by aspersion – which is the fancy word for “sprinkling.” Ask our Baptist friends, and they’ll say we haven’t been baptized at all. Many of us were baptized as infants. Our Baptist friends (and some others) will say the same about that. Different Christians have different understandings of baptism. The professor and author Maxwell Johnson says there are at least nine different understandings of baptism in the New Testament. Those nine different meanings are: forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit; new birth through water and the Holy Spirit; putting off of the old self and putting on the new, that is, being clothed in the righteousness of Christ; initiation into the one body of the Christian community; washing, sanctification, and justification in Christ and the Holy Spirit; enlightenment; being anointed and/or sealed by the Holy Spirit; being sealed or marked as belonging to God and God’s people; and, being joined to Christ through participation in his death, burial, and resurrection.¹

Nine different meanings for baptism, in the New Testament alone! That doesn’t even get into what the various denominations of today think. It’s no wonder we are confused by it. Here’s the good news: we call baptism a “sacrament,” which is a translation from the Greek word originally used. That word was *mysterion*, or mystery. We affirm that the sacraments – baptism and the Lord’s Supper – are mysteries. We will not understand the depth of meaning of these acts until we are face to face with God. So, when someone tells you that we baptize the wrong way or believe the wrong thing about baptism, you can just tell them “baptism is a mystery” and move along to another topic.

¹ Johnson, Maxwell E. *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*. New York: Liturgical Press, 2007, page 37.

Or, we can explore it a bit further, knowing that we can only scratch the surface of the meaning of baptism. We read this morning Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus. Jesus' baptism is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with each having their own way of telling the story. We have just spent the last few weeks immersed in the story of Jesus' birth. We heard all about it from Matthew and Luke, but take a look at Mark. We just read the first 11 verses of Mark. There's no birth story! Mark doesn't tell about the birth of Jesus. He just starts talking about John for 8 verses and then Jesus is baptized. Mark says this is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." For Mark, the birth story is not needed. He starts right in with the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus is baptized – and it's the beginning. It was Jesus' commissioning service, preparing Him for what lay ahead. And, we Presbyterians believe the same about our baptisms.

The Directory of Worship says "As a sign and seal of God's gracious action and our grateful response, Baptism is the foundation for all Christian commitment." (W-4.0101)

The PC(USA) *Declaration of Faith* says the following about baptism:

"We believe that in Baptism the Spirit demonstrates and confirms God's promise to include us and our children in his gracious covenant, cleansing us from sin, and giving us newness of life, as participants in Christ's death and resurrection. Baptism sets us in the visible community of Christ's people and joins us to all other believers by a powerful bond. In baptism we give ourselves up in faith and repentance to be the Lord's. For both children and adults, baptism is a reminder that God loves us long before we can love him. For both, God's grace and our response to it are not tied to the moment of Baptism, but continue and deepen throughout life." (6.5)

For Presbyterians, baptism is a mark of the covenant. In the Old Testament, members of the covenant were marked by circumcision. The new covenant of grace through Jesus Christ is marked by baptism. As the *PC(USA) Book of Order* states, “Like circumcision, a sign of God’s gracious covenant with Israel, Baptism is a sign of God’s gracious covenant with the Church.” (W-3.0402) Mark tells us that John’s baptism was about repentance, but John told everyone that Jesus was coming and His baptism would be different – He would baptize with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus was baptized, He ushered in a new baptism. Instead of being about washing away sin, baptism brings about the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus wasn’t baptized as one needing repentance, because He was without sin. Jesus was baptized to transform baptism into a mark of the covenant of grace. There is a familiar saying that sacraments are “an outward sign of an inward grace.” Baptism is a public affirmation of the saving grace of our Lord. It is a symbolic act and a meaningful one, but it is not itself the saving act. Paul tells us in Ephesians “for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” We are not saved by an act of our own doing, or of the pastor’s doing in sprinkling water or immersing us. We are saved by the grace of God. Baptism is a mark of that grace. It is a mark of the Spirit of God descending on us as it did on Jesus.

We do not have to get baptized to be forgiven our sins. We have a prayer of confession most Sundays here, and I encourage you to ask God’s forgiveness at other times, as well. Baptism is not necessary to wipe away sins – God will do that at any time for anyone who asks! Baptism is, in our tradition, the mark of the covenant of God. It is something that should be sought out by all

believers, though it is not required for salvation. Baptism marks us as God's own and then it is our responsibility to act that way, by living in Christ and participating in the life of the church.

So, what about infant baptism? It is for this same reason – that baptism is a sign of the covenant with God – that we baptize infants. In baptism, a child is marked as an heir of the covenant of God's grace. This is no different from what baptism means for an older person who wasn't baptized as an infant. We aren't baptizing infants to forgive their sins, for they, like Christ at His baptism, haven't committed any. We are baptizing a child of God as a sign of the covenant of grace.

When we remember that we are baptized, we remember that God's spirit is with us. Those children had it a bit wrong. The minister says "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and *the Holy Ghost*." Not "in the hole you go." The spirit of God goes with us, wherever we go. But maybe they were onto something. God goes with us, whatever holes we go into. Whatever stresses or ailments or problems in our lives, God goes with us, down into that hole.

Whenever Martin Luther found himself ready to give up, whenever worry for his own life and the life of the Church he loved overwhelmed him, it is said that he would touch his forehead and say to himself: "Remember, Martin, you have been baptized."

Today, we will participate in a service called "Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant." It is a remembering of our baptisms. Whether those baptisms took place as infants, teens, or older, it doesn't matter. We can remember that we have been baptized. We can remember that God's Spirit goes with us, wherever we go. We can remember that we are marked by God as God's own and that God's love for us will never change. We can remember that baptism is a mystery – we

will not be able to fully understand what God does for us in our baptisms, but we can know that we belong to God and God is always with us. Amen