

“By the Waters of Baptism”
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Water. Cool, clear water. Seventy percent of the earth is covered with it. Two-thirds of your body is filled with it. In the beginning of time, the Spirit moved across the waters bringing order out of chaos. Water.

What could be better on a cold, winter day than a long, hot bath? What could be better on a spring day than a plunge into the pool. Be careful – don't stay under too long. There's a deadly side to this water. A teaspoon full of it in the wrong place will kill you on the spot. In the days of Noah, a flood covered the earth and the Israelites never forgot the devastation. They remembered it generation after generation. You see, it's one, two, three and you're through when the waters and breakers come over you.

In the church, we use water as a means of Christian baptism. This one time sacrament that takes a lifetime to understand and to embrace, comes to us as with significant memory and meaning. It is God's grace extended to you and to me. By the waters of baptism, we are claimed! By the waters of baptism, we are cleansed. I ask you today, on this first Sunday of the year, if you will think with me about those two words. The waters of baptism claim us. The waters of baptism claim us!

Actor Kirk Douglas, out in California, was on his way down to Palm Springs one day, when he stopped and picked up a sailor who was hitchhiking. The sailor sort of settled into the seat next to Douglas and then suddenly looked at him and realized he was with a famous movie actor. He rose up to

the edge of his seat, looked Douglas in the eye, and said, "Hey, buddy, do you know who you are?" Well, I raise that question to you today -- do you know who you are? Who am I? Where am I going? To whom do I belong? What matters to me in the long run? These are questions of a lifetime. I used to think that you could settle those questions by the time you had finished adolescence. I hoped by age twenty to have those figured out. I'm fifty-five now and I've just begun to ask some of them.

Who am I? If I go to Owen County, Kentucky today, I'm James Olds' boy. If I go to the University of Louisville Medical School, I'm Brad's dad. The United States Government doesn't care about my name. They just know my social security number; that's all they care about. In the church, I'm an elder. I'm feeling more elderly every year.

Who am I? Is that who I am -- a position, a role, a relationship, a connection at a particular place at a particular time in a particular way? No. Baptismal Sunday reminds me of something else. It reminds me that by the waters of baptism, I have been claimed as a child of God.

So the gospels tell us that Jesus went down to the muddy Jordan in order to be baptized. Coming up from the waters, the heavens open and a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son whom I love, with whom I am well pleased."

You're a child of the universe. No less than the sun, the moon and the stars, you have a place in God's great plan. If God had a refrigerator, He'd put your picture on it. If God carried a wallet, He'd have your photo in it. Like the snowflakes that have fallen in these winter months, you are unique and one of a kind. Your DNA is individual just for you. It is more than my small mind can begin to comprehend. Then when life is done and the sun is setting and it's all too soon a race that's been run, I read in the

Book that there's a place for me in eternity where the sun never sets and the tears are gone forever. I am a claimed child of God.

Remember. Remember who you are. By the waters of baptism, we're not only claimed as a child of God, we're given a name. We're given a name above any name that we could ever imagine. At the waters of baptism, I am given the name "Christian." At my baptism, I am marked as a "Christ-ian." That's more than I can comprehend.

Society tells us to go out and make a name for yourself. Most of us try to do that. We set out in our lives and try to do our best. "Go out and make a name for yourself," they say, "and come back in forty years, we'll set you on a shelf and give you a social security check." We've worked at that. Some of us have been at it for a lifetime and to some degree, you know, we've made names for ourselves. You've got an award or two hanging on your wall. Some of you have written a book. Some of you even have a building named after you. You have a diploma or two and we still come home and wonder, "Who am I?"

I've got good news for you. You have a name that's better than anything you have ever accomplished in all your life and you didn't do one single thing to earn it. Your name is a gift to you and the gift that God has given you is that He dares to call you by the name Christian. That is your name. You are a Christ-ian. You embrace the image and the likeness and the kinship of none other than Christ Himself. I don't know about you but that's way too much for me. That's like Beth trying to become Elizabeth. That's like Bob trying to become Robert. That's like Jimmy trying to stretch into James or Kitty trying to become Kathryn. It's more than I can imagine. Roberta Bondi said in one of her books, "Most of us who call ourselves Christian, long to become what we call ourselves." Indeed, we do and yet God has so

gifted us, and so loved us, and so extended grace to us, that He calls us by that name. You are a Christian -- that is your name, don't ever forget it.

One of my favorite movies of all time is *The Lion King*. I go back and watch it again and again. I don't have any children to watch it with anymore, but I watch it anyway. Simba, the lion cub, is destined by his birth to become "The Lion King." The problem is, he doesn't know it. Furthermore, Scar, his uncle, has convinced Simba that he's no good. He is responsible, in part, for the untimely death of his father. So Simba lives in the foreign lands, in the wilderness, with the underlings of creatures. While he's wandering there thinking his life is done and no good and will amount to nothing, that priest-like character, which is a monkey (I'm still trying to put that together!) shows up one day and pops Simba over the head with a coconut. He says to Simba, "Who are you?" Before Simba can answer he says, "I know who you are, you are Mufassa's boy." Simba says, "No, no, you don't understand. I've betrayed that." So he leads him down to the waters and there on his paws, he sees his reflection in the water. As he perceives his reflection, suddenly the sky opens and a voice comes from heaven, "Simba, Simba." It is the voice of his father, Mufassa. "Simba, remember, remember who are are."

I say to you, my friends, remember, remember who are. Jesus said, "You did not choose me, I have chosen you and sent you out to bear much fruit." By the waters of baptism, we are incorporated into the body of Christ. By the waters of baptism, we are initiated into the acts of salvation. By the waters of baptism, we are marked as Christian disciples. We are claimed as children of God and we are given a name that is above every name. By the waters of baptism, remember who you are. By the waters of baptism, remember you are cleansed.

Luke, chapter 3, opens this way: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee, there came one preaching in the wilderness, the son of Zechariah, whose name was John.” The message he preached was this, “Repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins.”

Now I love that word – remission. I have a particular kinship with that word, remission. I remember sitting in my oncologist office three years ago. A nice nurse took me through the process I would experience from chemotherapy. It was a radical act to get cancer in remission. She was kind and nice. She showed me a video. She tried being gentle and when she had finished it all, she said, “Do you have any questions?” I said, “You bet I have questions. Am I going to lose my hair?” “Yes.” “Am I going to be sick at my stomach everyday?” “Yes.” “Am I going to lose my appetite?” “Yes.”

Many of you know exactly what I experienced that day because you’ve been there as well. After I had asked four or five questions, I looked her in the eye and said, “Why would anybody in their right mind submit themselves to this kind of thing, you know, poison in your body, for months?” She looked me in the eye and said, “You want to live don’t you?” You see, radical problems call for radical cures.

Sin is such that you have to kill the stuff to get rid of it. A radical disease calls for a radical act to eradicate it. That’s what baptism is all about. So when Paul theologized about baptism, he said we are buried with Christ in baptism, killed, if you please, under the waters in order that we could be raised with Christ into new life. There’s something radical and deadly going on in the baptismal act. Let us never forget it. Indeed, there is. It is a radical cure for a radical problem and the problem is sin. It grips us and it will kill us if we don’t find a remedy for it.

I’ve been known to be extremely liberal with the water I use

in baptisms. One day after I'd baptized a baby, somebody said to me, "I thought you were going to drown that child." I said, "You're about to get it. You're beginning to understand it." That's what it's all about.

I remember once when I was pastoring Trinity Hill in Lexington, Kentucky that a whole family came to be baptized, -- a mother, a father, and three children. I baptized the mother and the father and there was a two-year old whose dad was just holding on to him with all of his might. He obviously figured out what was about to happen. When it came to his turn, he jerked loose from his dad and shot to the door as fast as he could possibly go. The ushers picked him up and brought him back to the chancel area, kicking and screaming all the way. Suddenly I asked myself a question. Is this a kid throwing a fit or is this the devil realizing that he's about to be killed in the spiritual act of baptism? Do you understand what I'm saying? Radical problems call for radical cures and baptism is a radical act for a radical disease so I ask you today, my dear friends, as I asked myself before I could ever preach this sermon, "What action, what attitude, what addiction, what ambition, must die in you in order that you can come to life in Christ?" What are the habits that you have today that are hurting you? What are the things you're doing that destroy your soul and rob you of your very spiritual being? Are you willing to turn them loose at the waters of baptism that they may be washed away? Every sin of your life will be washed away.

You see, to remember your baptism is not just to recall something. To remember your baptism is to bring all of the power of that spiritual means of grace in the past into this present moment. The Spirit of God is present right here, right now in this place wanting to do that washing act for you. He's wanting to remind you that you are a named child of God. So my friends, if you're willing to reject and renounce the forces of evil and reject the powers of Satan,

and repent of your sins, come to the water. Come to the water of baptism. If you're willing to accept the freedom and the power that God gives you to resist evil and injustice, come and experience the water, the power of God's grace extended to you. Come, come to the water. If you confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and pledge your allegiance to His kingdom and if you embrace this community of faith where you may live out your faith day after day and year after year then come to the water. Come to the waters of baptism where you can remember who you are and be cleansed of all that threatens to kill you. Come, come to the waters.

It was said of Martin Luther, that great reformer, in the most difficult days of his life, when he was most lonely, when he would fight the devils by throwing inkwells at them out of his study, that when he was at his lowest moments and his most tempted times of his life, he would reach into the water and make the sign of the cross across his brow. He would say, "Baptismatus Sum, I am baptized, I am baptized. Thanks be to God."

We have been claimed and cleansed. Let us dare to live into that reality. Come to the waters. They were meant for you.