

# Born Out of Water

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, August 29, 2010)

Genesis 1:1-5 <sup>1</sup>In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup>the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. <sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1:4-11 <sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Wasn’t that wonderful? I always love baptisms - baptizing children is a special blessing. But what happened – what does baptism mean to us? There are a lot of different interpretations of Baptism held by various groups. Many people simply think of Baptism as the sign of joining the community of faith. With infant baptism it is a commitment on the part of the parents, and the congregation, to help the child grow in faith and eventually come to an age of reason where the child will stand up and confirm the vows made on their behalf. But baptism is more than just a rite of initiation into the church.

Throughout history many have understood baptism as an act of repentance. Mark’s Gospel even tells us that John’s baptism was a **“Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”** Matthew expands on this, recording some pretty harsh words from John the Baptist. Can you imagine this wild-looking man, greeting the religious leaders of the day with the words: **“You brood of vipers! Repent!”** But if you understand baptism as only a sign of repentance and forgiveness, you have a problem. Did you look at Emma and Grace, Merrissa and Robbie as they were baptized? These are not evil sinners, and their parents did not bring them so that they might be forgiven.

Some theologians have tried to help us understand that baptism is a sign of cleansing of original sin. While it is true that we are all sinners, and that we all inherit the same inclination toward sin exhibited by Adam and Eve, if all we see in baptism is forgiveness of sins, then we should all come together at the end of each day, every day, and be baptized so that we could be forgiven our sins of that day.

But there is another problem with this understanding of baptism. If Jesus truly was the son of God, why would he need to be baptized? Was not Jesus blameless, without sin? Why would he need to repent? Even John the Baptist saw the problem here. When John saw Jesus coming to him to be baptized, at first he refused. John told Jesus that this baptism should be the other way around. Jesus should baptize him. But Jesus told him, “humor me. Let it be this way for now. Go through with it, and you might learn something.”

Which John did. And we all can learn something, if we pay attention. As Jesus came up out of the water, God spoke and said: **“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased!”** Through this baptism we see the fullness of God – God the Father, who spoke these words of acceptance. God the Son, who is Jesus Christ and God the Holy Spirit, who descended from heaven like a dove.

Water is so ordinary. It is essential for life as we know it. We need water to drink, to wash and for plants to grow. If there is too much, we can have problems, such as flooding. To the ancient Israelites, water was even something to be feared. They were desert people, as I mentioned in the introduction to the lesson, and they were afraid of the oceans. But they also knew that God could work wonders through this ordinary, essential, frightening water. And so it made sense to them to write that in the beginning the Spirit of God swept over the waters, the frightening, chaotic, essential waters. And from these waters, these mysterious, formless waters, God performed the mightiest of deeds – He created the heavens and the earth. Out of the waters of Chaos, God created something new, something with form, something with purpose.

Even modern science cannot quarrel with this story. The theory of evolution claims that all life evolved from the oceans. Modern science searches the planets for signs of water, without which we cannot imagine life. Even human life begins in the waters of the mother’s womb.

And so does our new life of faith begins in waters, the waters of baptism. We can think of baptism as a sign of joining the fellowship of Christ – nothing wrong with that. And we can think of baptism as an act that cleanses us of our sins, and even the sins of our ancestors. But we are better informed to see baptism as a sign of rebirth, born as God’s children. Think of your baptism as a rebirth, not a natural, physical birth, but a birth that is like a whole new creation. In Baptism God is creating each one of us as a new person, a person of faith, and even more important, as a person with a new relationship to God. You are no longer simply God’s creature, but you are sons and daughters of God.

When Jesus was baptized, when he came out of the water, the voice of God was heard to say: **“Behold, my son, in whom I am well pleased.”** Just as we are brothers and sisters of Christ, so we are sons and daughters of God. And as we also rise from the waters, God says to each one of us, **“Behold my son, my daughter, in whom I am well pleased.”**

Being a new person does not remove you from the trials of this life. There will still be pain, and suffering, and even death. But because you are reborn in baptism, God will be with you through all your trials, even death.

When you were baptized, you were created as a new person, pure and holy. Remember your baptism this day. Live each day as a baptized child of God. Live as one who is no longer in the waters of chaos, but as one who has been born anew out of the water of baptism. Amen.