WASHED IN GRACE

By Nancy S. Cushman

Matthew 3:13-17

January 8, 2017 North Scottsdale UMC

# SETTING THE CONTEXT

Over the last few weeks we have celebrated the birth of Jesus, God-with-us. The angels announced the birth, shepherds came and saw the newborn. Jesus received his name as required by the Jewish law. In Matthew’s Gospel, he adds a visitation by Wise men from the East and the Holy Family’s dramatic escape from the murderous intent of Herod, an intent that took the lives of many young children in Bethlehem and made the Holy Family refugees. When Herod died, the Holy Family returned to Israel, but understanding that the threat may have lived on in the next king, they made their home in Nazareth in Galilee, a good area to hide. Matthew goes silent here for many years; he doesn’t share any more stories from Jesus’ childhood or adolescence. The next story he shares is about 30 years after Jesus’ birth and it’s about baptism. John the Baptist prepares for his ministry by calling people to change, “Repent the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Isn’t that what we have been celebrating? The One who embodies God’s presence, the One who will show us the character and desire of God has come to us in the form of a child; that child now grown comes to lead us to the kingdom of heaven and he begins with baptism.

Read Matthew 3:13-17

# THE SERMON

My parents still get a daily newspaper delivered and so while I was on vacation visiting them, I took up an old habit of reading Dear Abby. One day the following letter appeared in the column:

 “Dear Abby: My niece has a 1-year-old son. Neither my niece nor the baby’s father is religious, and they have chosen not to have the baby baptized. My sister, the baby’s grandmother, while not wanting to impose her beliefs on the parents, comes from a generation when even couples who were not demonstrably religious usually had their baby baptized.

I know it would comfort my sister to know this ancient ceremony had been performed. Since my sister watches the little boy at her house, would it be wrong for us to organize an informal baptism- just holy water and a couple of prayers? We don’t feel we need to have an officiant of any religion present and, of course, we would not tell the baby’s parents. Would this be appropriate? Mortified in Montana”[[1]](#endnote-1)

So what do you think Abby’s answer was to Mortified’s question, “would this be appropriate?” Of course, it was “No.” Abby went on to talk about the relational reasons for saying, “no,” but Mortified also has an incorrect understanding of baptism so I thought I’d write my own reply:

Dear Mortified: Baptizing a child without the parents’ consent is not appropriate on many levels. Not only will you have a very angry daughter and niece on your hands, but you and the child will have missed the heart of baptism. **Baptism is the public act of receiving God’s gift of love**. In the opening statement of our baptisms we say, “Baptism is a public declaration of God’s promise: I will be your God. I have chosen you and I will never let you go.” So you see, baptism really needs to be done in public where other people can hear and celebrate the receipt of this incredible gift from God. Doing a private ceremony at your sister’s home without the child’s parents present really doesn’t meet the spirit of the event. **While baptism is about accepting this eternal promise of relationship, it also includes us making a promise back**. Like any relationship, both parties need to contribute to it to make it vital and strong. When we are baptized, we promise to live out that loving relationship through Jesus. We promise to trust him and to live our lives according to his example and teachings. **When a young child, like your great-nephew, is baptized, the parents and godparents promise to raise the child to be in relationship with God which includes knowing the great love story of God found in the Bible and teaching and nurturing them in the practices that nourish a relationship with God**. They promise to raise the child knowing Jesus. So you see the parents are vitally important in the baptism of a child for they will be the ones who help the child open the gift of God’s love and to experience it. But there’s more!

The waters of baptism are healing waters. Through baptism, we are washed in grace. Every human life experiences separation from God. Not one of us live flawlessly, not one of us love completely in sync with God’s intention and desire. **The waters of baptism symbolize being cleansed by God’s initiating, enabling and empowering grace. We baptize each person in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit-the Initiating grace of the creating Father, the Enabling grace of the Son and the Empowering Grace of the Holy Spirit**. An image that is sometimes used is that our old selves drown in the water and our new selves arise out of the water. That’s why some churches insist on being fully immersed in the water to act out this image. (Our United Methodist church lets you choose whether you want to be sprinkled with water, have it poured or be immersed)[[2]](#endnote-2) It is a rather graphic way of thinking about renewal- dying to the old and rising to the new. John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance which means a change of heart or direction and that does involve dying to an old way of being and embracing a new way of being. **Baptism is a sign-act of this process of renewal which continues through the life of the Christian**. I don’t know anyone who has become completely Christ-like in an instant. It is a process of growth involving dying and rising, repentance and renewal as we become more and more like Christ. I think of trees along a river that draw the river’s water through their roots. Each year the trees nourished by the water grow in the spring and summer then die back a little in the winter through the seasons of dying and living anew they grow taller and taller. For us the process does not involve seasons of weather, but of repentance (change) and renewal as we are washed in God’s grace and grow anew. But there’s more!

The church community who witness the baptism make their own promise to the person being baptized and their family. **They promise to surround the family with Christian love and to continually remind them about God’s gift of love through Jesus and to help them live into that gift of love.** So you see the church who will be part of the child’s life are also vitally important in the baptism. But there’s more!

Baptism is a sacrament of belonging. **When we are baptized, we become part of the great cosmic story of God’s loving action and intention which began at creation and is told in the Bible.** It is a story that doesn’t end at the end of the Bible, but continues in the lives of every person of faith. It is a story literally embodied in Jesus the Christ, lived out in the lives of his disciples and followers down through the generations and continues through our lives. It is a story that will continue long after we are gone in the generations of followers to come. Through baptism, we join the world-wide, multigenerational, multi-cultural family called Christian, a family as wide as the earth and as deep as all the generations from the time of Christ, himself. Do you see what an incredible event this is in the life of a family? But there’s more!

**Baptism involves not only belonging but it involves being set apart to live the Christian way and God gives us the power to live that way through the Holy Spirit**. Just as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism, we receive the Holy Spirit, the empowering grace of God that helps us live the promises we have just made. As Christians, we are set apart to proclaim in word and deed God’s love as shown to us by Jesus the Christ and to live as he lived in love and service to others and the Holy Spirit helps us do that. Baptism is powerful. Baptism is wonderful.

So you see, Mortified, I would hate for your grand-nephew and his parents to miss out of the full meaning of baptism. It is far better for you to be patient, to respectfully share your faith with him (and his parents). Read him the stories of Jesus, pray before you eat together. Tell him and show him in how you live how you experience God. When the time is right, tell him (and his parents) about baptism, perhaps you can show them this letter and let him know the Gift of Love is waiting for him to open it. Then his baptism can be all it was meant to be and he can receive the fullness of the Gift and experience it. May God guide and bless you all.

Signed One Who Has Been Washed in Grace.

1. “Grandma wants to have a secret baptism for baby.” Dear Abby, San Antonio Express-News. Tuesday, January 3, 2017, D3. Read at <http://www.uexpress.com/dearabby/2017/1/3/secret-baptism-for-baby-is-scheme>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In the United Methodist Church, we baptize people by sprinkling water on them, pouring it on them or immersing them in water completely. While all of the baptisms I have performed have been by sprinkling, we will do whatever is most meaningful to the person being baptized. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)