

“The Power of a Simple Ceremony”  
by the Reverend Doctor Peter W. Allen  
Hingham Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

A couple of weeks from now, two of our newest young families will bring their children forward to be baptized. As an ordained minister, these are the moments that make any of the challenges of my role completely worthwhile. To have the trust of parents as they hand me their precious children, to bless them, to introduce them to all of you, to celebrate life, and to name God’s love is a deep honor and a soaring pleasure.

As part of the ceremony, I will put water on the foreheads of Jonah, Connor, and Mackenzie. They might squirm and they might cry or they might just look up at me in silent wonder. Or maybe when they do that, they are looking at the ceiling fans; I’m not sure.

I will walk them up the aisle so that you can see them and know that they are a part of your spiritual family. I will lift up God’s grace as a central reality in their lives. All of us will make promises to one another.

All of the elements of the ceremony are important, but the water is essential. Not because it is special water. It won’t from the Jordan River; it’ll be from the tap in the kitchen downstairs. I *have* baptized people with water from the Jordan, which was pretty cool, but for the most part, the water I’ve used for baptism has been from good old New England wells and reservoirs.

Which is actually a good thing to my way of thinking. Baptism with regular local water adds to the earthiness and equalizing power of the ceremony.

Baptism carries with it many layers of meaning, but it all starts with the water. Human life -- and all of life -- begins in water. If we can dare to bring together science and theology this morning, we can say that water is refreshing, cleansing, elemental and sacred.

The origins of Christian baptism can be traced to a man named John the Baptist – or as he has more recently been called, John the Baptizer.

Times were terrible. It was the early first century and the Romans were occupying Palestine. They exercised brutal control over the Jewish people, often crucifying hundreds or even thousands of those they felt were threatening their rule. Jews were allowed to worship in the Temple in Jerusalem, but life was definitely not business as usual. The punishing taxes made everyday existence extremely challenging.

Everyone was trying to make sense of the situation. They were asking, *Why has God allowed this to happen to us? Have we done something wrong? How might we seek meaning and relief and liberation, even while the Romans are still here?*

John had an answer. He believed that the people could be transformed by getting back to basics, by getting clean both spiritually and physically. There was an internal, confessional dimension to his message and a social justice aspect as well. So he invited folks to the Jordan River, asked them to repent, gave them a ritual bath, and encouraged them to be authentic in their faith – to not just go through the motions, but live it out.

Historically, in order to enter the Temple in Jerusalem, someone who had become “unclean” for some reason (because of behavior or disease or menstruation or childbirth) had to take a ritual bath called a *mikveh*. John, who was the son of a priest in the Jerusalem Temple, took on the identity of a *rebel* priest and held these outdoor services far from the city limits, where his ancestors had crossed into the Promised Land.

One day, a young working class man with a wicked Galilean accent showed up at one of John’s impromptu outdoor services. Like all the others, he went down into the river and asked John to baptize him.

In Matthew’s account, John protests, saying that *Jesus* should be the one baptizing *him*, not the other way around. But all four gospel writers say that Jesus seeks John’s baptism, and that, in that moment, God names him as his son. In other words, it is in his baptism that Jesus truly becomes who he is and is meant to be.

Why? I think it has something to do with the water. To be human is to be made of mostly of water. To be human is to be in need of water to drink and to cleanse oneself. To be the Messiah, Jesus needs to be both divine *and* human. Or perhaps a divine spirit who becomes human, or a human spirit who becomes divine.

In any event, full emersion baptism definitely carries with it a powerful experience of humility and renewal -- and Jesus needs that before embarking on his very intense ministry.

Whenever we baptize an infant or a child or a teen or a young adult or an older adult here in our sanctuary, we all have the opportunity to reaffirm our own baptismal vows and remember the meaning of our baptism, even if we can’t remember it.

I was baptized in the Greens Farms Congregational Church in Westport, Connecticut, in January of 1963 by the Reverend Ed Straight. My parents, an uncle and aunt, three of my grandparents, and my older sister and brother were there.

My godparents, who would become very important people in my life, were present as well. Their son, who would be born later that year, would become my best friend.

But aside from being a charming rite of passage, a lovely ceremony, and an opportunity for family gathering, what does our baptism mean to us? Do you know where you were baptized and who baptized you? Did your parents decide for you and are you aware of what went into their decision? Or did you choose baptism for yourself, later in your life?

Some assign a very specific meaning to baptism: To them, it is an essential act of cleansing, a way to remove the stain of original sin (which is the idea that we are all born evil and need to be saved from that evil). In days gone by, parents had their children baptized as soon as possible after birth in case they died and had to spend eternity in limbo, or worse, in hell.

I have come to believe that we are born *not possessed by evil*, but rather *blessed by the grace of God*, and, in baptism, we name that grace. As a Christian, I believe that God forgives us when we do or say something wrong and empowers us to be better people going forward, if we choose that pathway. Our baptism points us toward for that pathway

In our tradition, we baptize during the regular Sunday morning worship service because we know, deep down, that the *community*, that *God's people*, that *all of us*, play an essential role in communicating and acting out God's grace.

It's part of our calling as a spiritual community of baptized people to be that conduit of that grace.

I would also say that baptism as the source of all sorts of callings. As someone who has been marked with water and the spirit, where is your baptism calling you?

It could be to a period of re-engagement here at church or to a leadership role or to some other kind of service or to some sort of activism or to a deeper commitment to your own personal spiritual growth through prayer and study and discussion.

Whatever it is, I urge all of us to let the power of that simple ceremony, where you are named and God's forgiving, empowering love is named, to guide and shape our lives.

Amen