

The Sacrament of Baptism
[Isaiah 40:1-11](#), [Mark 1:1-8](#)

It may seem a little odd to be talking about baptism during the Advent season. I mean, after all, shouldn't we be talking about Bethlehem, baby Jesus and shepherds? I promise you we will get to that as we get closer to Christmas. But Advent is a time of preparation. It is a time when we ready our hearts for the return of Jesus.

In the early church, baptisms were conducted only one time per year on Easter Sunday. Candidates for baptism (adults) prepared for an entire year with fasting, prayer, study, and soul-searching. Once completed, they were baptized in a separate room (no congregation was present). They were then robed and brought into the sanctuary and welcomed into the church body by taking communion for

the first time. I'd like to share a story with you from Dr. Laurence Stookey's book on baptism.

Early in this century, a baby born in England, Lucille by name, was taken by her maternal grandmother to the local Wesleyan chapel to be baptized. Lucy's father, a sturdy Anglican, was skeptical about the whole proceeding since the Church of England does not regard Methodist clergy as being in the apostolic succession. So he took Lucy to the Anglican parish church where she was baptized again. Now Lucy's mother was a convert to the Salvation Army and didn't think much of either the Wesleyans or the Anglicans. So she took Lucy to the local citadel for presentation under the banner of blood and fire – the Salvationist counterpart to baptism.

In time the family emigrated to the Midwestern United States. The community they moved in to had neither an

Episcopal Church nor an Army Citadel; so the family attended the Methodist Church. As a teenager, Lucy joined a class of those preparing to take the vows of church membership. Now it happened that the pastor was one of those mavericks who looks upon the practices of his own denomination with disapproval, and regards the baptism of infants as a misguided tradition. He therefore decreed that all in the class had to be 'truly baptized' at the font on the day of their vows. Lucy's mother discovered what was afoot and said, "Absolutely not. Three times is enough for anyone." But Lucy was a good psychologist and knew that once her mother was seated in church, she would not make a scene. When the rest of the group went to the font, so did Lucy! [Baptism #4]

Now it came to pass that some years later Lucy fell in love with, and married, a Southern Baptist – but not

without extracting from him a pledge that she need not be baptized yet again. He agreed that she was quite sufficiently initiated into the church, and all was well – until they moved to a community where they attended a Baptist Church that was in need of a pianist. Lucy loved to play, and seemed to be a providential gift to the congregation. But, ruled the deacons solemnly and steadfastly, unimmersed hands may not play the Lord's songs for us. And so, for the fifth time, Lucy was initiated into Christ's church.

This story brings to life a lot of assumptions we may have concerning the way we do things in church. Baptism is one of the 2 sacraments of our denomination. As such, it is an extremely important activity for us. Baptism is a gift from God. But what exactly does it mean? The girls and I talked a little about how baptism is our welcome into the

church. Using the symbol of water and the various ways and rituals surrounding baptism, we try to enact the principle of dying to ourselves and rising with Christ. We symbolize our commitment to follow Christ.

Baptism is a welcoming of one of God's creatures into the family of God. A strict definition of a sacrament is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace'. Where a lot of churches get hung up is on the method of baptism. Do we use immersion? Do we baptize babies or adults (also known as 'believer's baptism)? If immersion is used, should you go into the water face down or backwards? What about pouring? [Show shell]

There are biblical references to support all of these types of baptism. In our scripture lesson for today, we see John baptizing adults by immersion. Jesus also was baptized as an adult. However there are scriptural

references for baptizing whole families, including children.

During the dry season in Palestine, the Jordan River was very shallow. As this was a popular baptismal location, it would be impossible to do immersion baptisms during this time. It was thought that perhaps pouring was used.

Some of us trip most heartily on the details to the point where we forget the meaning. Baptism is our initiation into Christ's church. The use of water reminds us of our initial birth and also of creation and how water covered the earth. The words stated, either to the adult or the parents of an infant being baptized, ask for specific responses. Do you repent of your sin? Do you accept the freedom to resist evil? Do you confess Jesus as your Savior? For parents, they are asked about their willingness to teach their child about God's grace through instruction and example. As a body of Christ, the congregation is also

asked to renew our commitment to God's calling in our lives. We agree to provide spiritual guidance to the newly baptized so that all may continue to grow and mature to be more like Christ. This is no little task – we are taking responsibility to love one another as Christ first loved us.

Baptism and Advent go hand in hand. Each looks for a time of preparation and soul-searching to make a deeper commitment to Christ and the work to be done in his vineyard. As we continue to watch and wait and prepare, let us make our hearts right with God. We are celebrating communion today. Let this be a time that you can earnestly seek God's will for your life. What is God calling us to do? How can we be better servants of Christ? Let us celebrate God's gifts to us together as a body of Christ's believers.

Amen.