

“Coming up out of the water”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Titus 3:4-7 and Mark 1:9-11

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I don't mean to alarm anyone, but we have here at Westminster a... bat problem. I know, I know. That's nothing new for this old church. I've helped remove a few of them myself over the years, as I am sure some of you have as well. But the problem seems to be growing. Pride House had several aggressive bats this past Thursday; one of our support groups was run out of the building, under attack. A few weeks ago, a bat swooped into Melanie our church secretary's office, as she screamed and, despite a broken foot, ran out of that office like she was Usain Bolt, as she called for Shawn, our property caretaker, to come help. As he ran into the office, she slammed the door on him, trapping him inside with the bat.

Meanwhile, if anyone is looking for some entertainment, you can watch security footage of your pastor walking into the conference room, seeing a bat come straight toward him, shouting “oh...” followed by a word that should not be spoken in a church especially by a pastor, and then booking it down the hallway as the bat swoops after him, only for him to dive into his office, slam his door, as the bat flies past multiple times.

Let's just say that it's a good thing we are worshiping outside today. But if you see a shadow hovering over you, it might not be the Holy Spirit.

I've been racking my brain, trying to figure out how to get rid of these bats. We've thought about pest control, catching and releasing them, fumigation. But one pastor told me that he has a sure-fire way to get rid of bats. Works every time, he said. Guaranteed. “How?” I asked him. He said, “All you got to do is get a hold of these bats and... baptize them. That's right, just sprinkle a little water on them and say the trinitarian formula, and you'll never see them again. Even better, confirm them; make them members. They will disappear. At best, you'll see them at Christmas and Easter.”

It is both a horrifying thought, cradling a bat as you wash it with water, and a hilariously sad point about baptism.

The preachers tell us that when we are baptized, we're supposed to be reborn. We're supposed to become a new person, a disciple of Christ, free of sin. As soon as we come up out of those waters, whatever afflicted us before, whatever addictions, or bad habits, or selfishness, or doubts, should be cast away, their power over us broken.

Baptism is supposed to give us new life. But the new sure looks a lot like the old. We don't seem or feel all that different. We're still imperfect. We still struggle with all those afflictions. Some of us still lose faith. Babies still cry. Life is still hard. So what really happens when we come up out of that water?

Maybe part of the problem is that, when we think about baptism, we put so much emphasis on what *we* do. *We* become a new person. *We* overcome sin. *We* grow up to be good Christians. I am struck that, even in this baptism story of Jesus, he does almost nothing. He simply enters the waters. What happens after that is the work of God: the heavens, the Spirit like a dove, the voice. Oh he'll have plenty to do, but as he emerges from those waters, his hair soaking wet, his eyes blurry, his knees a little wobbly, the hands of John the Baptist holding him up, he really is just like you and me: vulnerable. He receives a gift that day, and maybe we do too.

I think Scripture tells us that five things happen when we come up out of that water.

First: We are loved. God calls Jesus “Beloved.” The Letter to Titus speaks of the “loving kindness of God.” God, of course, loves us before we’re baptized. God’s love is a gift, and as such, it is unconditional. Baptism, rather, is “God’s love made visible” (James White). It’s what awakens us, even as a child, to a relationship with God. It’s sort of like there’s a person out there who’s loved you all this time, from afar, wanting the best for you, delighting in you, believing in you, but you didn’t know; no one knew. And then at last, that person declares their love for you and the world to hear.

Second: We are forgiven. God says that God is “well pleased” with Jesus even though he hasn’t really done anything good yet. The Letter to Titus says that we are saved, “not because of any works of righteousness we have done, but according to God’s mercy.” When baptism cleanses us, it doesn’t mean that we’ll never sin again; it doesn’t remove our freedom or our imperfections, for that would be to remove our humanity. What baptism does is reveal how God perceives us, despite our sins, as forgiven children of God, with whom God is well pleased. That forgiveness is placed within us, continually, like a pacemaker that kicks into action any time something goes wrong.

Third: We are marked. As Jesus emerges from the waters, God says, “You are my Son.” The Letter to Titus says that we “become heirs” of God. In baptism, God signs us; God puts God’s name on us. That mark says we belong to God. This invisible mark, briefly made visible in the watery sign of the cross, is there any time we need to know that we are not alone, that our life has meaning and purpose; it’s there to give us a deeper understanding of who we are, an awareness of a reality beyond what we can perceive, a reminder that there’s some good in this world, and we’re a part of it.

Fourth: We are initiated. The community of the first disciples forms after Jesus’ baptism. The church begins with baptism in the Book of Acts. Through baptism, we are brought into a community, a family, which is here to support us, challenge us, grieve with us, rejoice with us, and give us a home, a place where we belong. God works through that community of faith to raise us. That’s why the congregation makes a vow in every baptism, promising to guide and nurture this child or adult. That’s why many churches, including our own, have baptismal fonts at their entrances—because baptism, not the door, is the true entrance to the church.

Fifth: We are called. Jesus is gifted with the Holy Spirit and begins his ministry. The Letter to Titus says that in baptism the Spirit is poured out also upon us. Baptism is a gift; it is also a

calling: to open that gift, enjoy it, share it. Baptism is a recognition that God has taken the first step in placing in us God's own Spirit, God's own power and wisdom and possibility, manifested uniquely in each of us, in different talents and insights and passions. We are called to grow in those gifts and put them into action, in ways that love God and neighbor. But even if we lose our way, which we almost always do, we never lose that first step. We can always start again.

Out of these waters, we are loved; we are forgiven; we are marked; we are initiated; we are called. All by God. As it is written in the Gospel of John, "You did not choose me but I chose you" (15:16).

It occurs to me, however, that maybe we've been asking the wrong question. It's not *what* happens to us; it's *who*. We enter that water a single person, alone before this terrible world, and when we come out, we emerge no longer alone, but a child of God, adopted into the family of God, with Jesus at our side, to weep when we weep, to hope when we hope, to dream and dare and rejoice with us, to guide us, to forgive us, to carry us through life and death and resurrection. We come out legion, many: for with Jesus are all the saints in heaven and earth who belong to him. Their strength, their wisdom, their love, courses through us as surely as our blood.

This does not make us infallible. It does not make us invulnerable to pain or heartbreak or temptation or doubt. Bad things will still happen. But, baptized, we face them together.

When we come up out of the water, we walk with armies. We walk with God.

We may at times walk away. We may stumble. We may fall. We may one day stop seeing the ones who walk with us. But even there, in those valleys, whether we know it or not, we still walk with God and all these saints of grace, because we still bear the mark of love, the mark of baptism. And that is one water that never washes off. **Amen.**