

“Baptized with purpose”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Mark 1:4-11 and Acts 19:1-7

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A few years ago, a meme began making the rounds on Facebook. It shows a baby, dressed in a baptismal gown, talking on what appears to be a phone but may actually be a TV remote. The caption reads: “So today, in church, a guy in a dress tried to drown me. And, I kid you not, my family just stood there taking pictures.”

Lesson of the meme: baptism can be confusing.

First, I want to go on record: I do not wear a dress; it’s a preaching robe, a Geneva gown, worn by scholars and pastors at the time of the Reformation. Though, I will admit, it does have all the benefits of a dress—it is airy and flow-y. It also has the added benefit of looking like I may have just stepped off a movie set from the Matrix. Which is cool!

OK, I forgot what I was talking about... Oh, yes, baptism.

My second thought, of course, is how that meme doesn’t even make sense anymore in our COVID world of isolation. Now, there are memes of masked pastors spraying babies with water guns: baptism by social distancing. Which probably makes for an even more confusing experience!

I have a sense that *a lot of us* aren’t clear on what happens during baptism. We know it has something to do with the forgiveness of sin, God’s love for us, the initiation into the life of the church. We know that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist and that he commissioned his disciples to go into the world, baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That’s pretty good, but it’s not the whole story.

The people in Ephesus, in our reading from Acts today, didn’t have the whole story either. Most of what they knew about baptism came from a man named Apollos. A lot of what he taught them about Jesus was spot on, but there were apparently some gaps in his knowledge, because when it came to baptism, all he knew was the version performed by John the Baptist. Which is like comparing a flip phone to a smart phone—same basic idea, but the later model does a lot more. Essentially, Apollos was working with old information. John had indeed baptized, but only in preparation for Jesus, who transformed the meaning of baptism.

When Paul arrives, he thus finds Christians who don’t understand the baptism of Jesus Christ. For them, baptism is just about the repentance of sin, wiping the slate clean.

But from the moment Jesus is baptized, baptism becomes so much more than that. It's not just water cleaning our souls. It's the Holy Spirit, says Paul. It's God dwelling in us. It's the dove coming down from heaven, where a voice says, "You are my Son, my Beloved."

Baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit doesn't change only the past; it changes the future. Our future. John's baptism got us to take our first step, to repent from sin, to see our past redeemed. But Jesus' baptism takes us a leap forward, into a whole new country, where we recognize that our entire lives have been reclaimed, and transformed, by God. Jesus' baptism isn't primarily about the font and what happens there; it is about every moment that comes after the font. It's about the moments of ministry in Jesus' life that started at his baptism. And it's about the moments of our ministry that start with ours.

Moments when we trust that we are driven, and inspired, and bound to, the same Spirit that dwelt in Mary when she conceived Jesus. The same Spirit that spurred her to sing of God tearing the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. The same Spirit that, through the angel Gabriel, proclaimed that "nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). The same Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness and gave him the strength to resist temptation and discover who he was. The same Spirit that anointed Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, gave him the courage to stand before his friends and family, and proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. The same Spirit that Jesus promised to his disciples—the Spirit that, at Jesus' ascension, gave the disciples the power to witness to the gospel of God's love to the ends of the earth, to face trial and rejection, even death, to stand down the mighty and heal the hurting (Acts 1).

When Paul talks about receiving the Holy Spirit, he's telling the Ephesians that it's not enough to be saved *from* something; we are saved *for* something.

And that something is our purpose. It is the Spirit of God being poured out on all flesh, so that, in the words of Peter and Joel before him, "our sons and our daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17).

Baptism is a call to action, with the promise that we do not act alone, that the greatest act was already accomplished by Jesus Christ, and that now the Spirit of God acts in us, through us, for the world. Baptism is when we receive the purpose, and the power, that God has prepared for us.

Remember your baptism. Know that the same Spirit that was in Mary, in Paul, in Jesus, is in you. You are a prophet. You are a minister. Called to mighty work. You were baptized with a purpose.

And today, we live this truth out by receiving new members and ordaining and installing officers of the church, elders and deacons. We're going to do this right after the service; we'll transition to Zoom for a reaffirmation of their baptism. We will invite them, and you along with them, to remember their baptism at the start of their calling. We will virtually lay hands, just as Paul did, on those newly ordained and those received as new members. And when we look at them, and when they look at themselves, I hope that we will see not just men, not just women, but prophets, disciples with a purpose, anointed by the Spirit to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and the gospel of God's salvation to the ends of the earth. **Amen.**