

“Taking the Plunge”

Mark 1:1-11



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As I was putting my thoughts together for today a song from one of my favorite Hollywood movies came into my head. Maybe you've heard it. It goes like this (sings):

As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the starry crown?
Good Lord show me the way!
O sisters let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O sisters let's go down
Down in the river to pray
As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the robe & crown?
Good Lord show me the way
O brothers let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
Come on brothers, let's go down
Down in the river to pray
As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the starry crown?
Good Lord show me the way
O fathers let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O fathers let's go down
Down in the river to pray
As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the robe and crown?
Good Lord show me the way

O mothers let's go down
Come on down, don't you wanna go down?
Come on mothers, let's go down
Down in the river to pray
As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the starry crown?
Good Lord show me the way
O sinners, let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O sinners, let's go down
Down in the river to pray
As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the robe and crown?
Good Lord show me the way.

Have you ever heard that song before? Where were you? We just sang it! Do you remember what movie this song comes from? Right! *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* And what is the song about? Right again! Baptism.

Last summer when Patty and I were on vacation we decided to drive over to the other side of Portland to check out a new church that was attracting lots of young adults. Their services are usually held in a school, but when we got there we found a note taped to the front door. It said they were having a baptism picnic out at Rooster Rock State Park on the Columbia River. Apparently, lots of new converts were going to take the plunge into its chilly waters. I'm sure it was an experience they would never forget.

My own baptism was decidedly less dramatic. I was “sprinkled” (not immersed) in a Methodist Church when I was barely out of the womb. The only reason I even remember it is because my parents took the time to tell me the story and to showed me the baptism certificate they pasted in my baby book. It's right there next to my birth certificate along with ink prints of my tiny hands and feet. If these records are trustworthy, two things seem relatively certain: I was born on April 11, 1946 in St. Paul, Minnesota, and I was baptized on May 12, 1946 at the ripe old age of 4 weeks! So what about you? Here's a quick quiz: 1) How many of you were baptized when you were infants or children? 2) How many of you were baptized when you were older – maybe as a teenager or as an adult? 3) How many of you have not been baptized or can't remember if you were or not? 4) For those of you who were baptized, what do you remember about that event?

You see, the sacrament of baptism is a one-time thing. Paul said, “There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:5).

Our baptism is not something that gets repeated again and again. Why do you think that is? Because baptism has a different purpose than the other sacrament Jesus instituted known as The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. At least once a month we come to this table to eat with our Lord.

We remember Jesus' willingness to lay down his life for his friends; how he took on himself the sins of the world, he was buried, and three days later was raised from the dead. So each time we eat the bread and drink the cup it's like eating a meal that nourishes us and strengthens us so we can be the people Christ wants us to be.

But this baptismal is the place of our identity. Like the day we were physically born; it marks our spiritual birthday. When God stirred the water we were marked and claimed as God's own. Our old selves went down in the water and our new selves emerged. Paul said we were born anew, “**The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.**” We're no longer living just for ourselves; now we're living with a greater purpose; we have a new calling; we are to be little Christ's, patterning our lives after Jesus himself.

Recently your church staff and elders have been discussing a book by Leonard Sweet called “The Gospel According to Starbucks.” He has a section in the book in which he uses a word we don't often come across: **Provenance**. It means **to bear the Maker's mark and the signature of the Creator**. An artist, composer, or poet produces a work of art and when you see or hear it you immediately say, “That's by Mozart; that's by Rembrandt; that's by Whitman or Frost. When we are baptized into Christ we become “little Christs,” or what Len Sweet calls “spittin' images. To say you're a spittin' image of your mother or father is to say that you bear both their spirit and image. You bring together the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible, of your parents. We're to be the spittin' image of Jesus in both body and character.

As we are formed in faith, and dare to call ourselves Christian, people should legitimately be able to ask: “Do you speak with a Jesus voice? Do you see with Jesus' eyes? Do you listen with Jesus ears? Do you touch with a Jesus touch?” In other words, do people see Christ in us? Or to use a different metaphor: Just as the apple seed becomes the apple tree, so to, the seed of Christ in a human being can grow into a little Christ. The promise of the gospel is that Jesus can live his resurrection life in us.

But baptism is a one-time event. That was true in the life of Jesus himself. Jesus' cousin, John, was baptizing people in the Jordan River. John lived in the wilderness around the Dead; he wore clothes that even the rummage sale people wouldn't want to handle. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time. The Kingdom of God was coming, John said, but if you thought it was going to be a tea party, you've better think again.

Because if you didn't shape up God would give you the axe like an elm with the blight or toss you into the furnace like chaff that's left when you've lambasted the good out of the wheat. It's enough to scare the hell right out of you, which is actually what John was hoping to do. John said, "I baptize with water, but the one who is coming after me will baptize with fire and the Spirit."

What did he mean? For centuries there was a school of thought in the church that felt we've got to get as many people as possible baptized as quickly as possible or they're likely to wind up in hell.

There is a true story about a hospital nurse who worked in the pediatric unit. A child was brought in who was in critical condition. In addition to her commitment to wellness, the nurse was also a practicing Catholic who believed that unless a person was baptized they would be consigned to hell. So believing that this infant would not make it through the night, she took it upon herself to summon a priest who administered the sacrament of baptism without the parents present. As it turned out, the child recovered; the next day her parents came to take her home and the nurse discovered that they were Jewish!

There was a time in church history when baptism was more of an orientation toward death than life. The medieval church experienced the black plague when tens of thousands of children as well as adults died from the disease. They thought of baptism as a kind of "fire insurance policy." If your child were to die but was baptized they reasoned that at least they'd be protected from the fires of eternity.

It was thought that if you died before being baptized you would go to "Limbo" which was the place where unbaptized infants and morally upright pagans go. Limbo is the halfway house between heaven and hell, or as Dante had it, the first circle of hell. This limbo is not to be confused with the dance you can't do.

Purgatory is just down the block. It's not for innocent children, but for sinners who haven't yet been assigned to heaven or hell. According to Catholic belief, immediately after death, a person undergoes judgment where it's determined that some are eternally united with God and assigned to Heaven, while others are destined for Hell, a state of eternal separation from God often envisioned as a fiery place of punishment.

Some souls were not sufficiently free from sin and its consequences to enter the state of heaven immediately, nor were they so sinful as to be destined for hell either, so they went to Purgatory. In that state friends and loved ones could pray for you to help make a difference in where you finally end up.

It seems to me that John the Baptist also spent a lot of time thinking about things like hell, purgatory, and limbo. One of John's favorite ways of addressing his congregation was to call them a snake pit. "Your only hope," he said, "was to clean up your act as if your life depended on it, which it did, and get baptized in a hurry as a sign that you had.

"I'm the one yelling himself blue in the face in the wilderness," John said, quoting the prophet Isaiah. "I'm the one trying to knock some sense into your heads" (Matthew 3:3).

So one day who should show up but Jesus. John knew who he was in a second. "You're the one who should be baptizing me," he said. But Jesus insisted, and so they waded out into the Jordan together, and as the song says, "went down in the river to pray." And notice what the Spirit of God said to Jesus, "You're my beloved son; you are my children, I am pleased with you."

That, I believe, is what God says to each of us in our baptism: "You're my beloved child; you (name) and you (name), I am pleased with you." Not, "if you don't take the plunge you're assigned to hell forever." But, "I love you; I was even willing to die for you."

This seems too good to be true. Our response to the statement is to say, "No way. You can't really mean it. You must be mistaking me for someone else. I don't believe that you are well pleased with me, because I have failed to do enough for you. I don't deserve your grace." We think "maybe my baptism didn't take the first time; maybe I need to do it all over again so that this time I can get it right."

If the truth be told, there are times in each of our lives when the light grows dim, the battery runs down; the energy we once felt has left us. When those times happen what are we to do? Have we missed the boat altogether? Should we just give up on the whole thing?

I have a friend who told me about a man he knew who believed in reincarnation. His friends were concerned because he spent all day, every day, sitting on his front porch. He did nothing else. Someone asked, "Why do you spend all your time in a chair on the porch?" He replied: "Well, with my life the way it is and the world the way it is, I may do something in my next life, but I've decided to sit this one out."

Some Christians might feel the same way about their baptism. They either feel that because they've been "saved" they think, they don't have to do anything. They don't have to give evidence to their faith through acts of love, kindness, mercy and justice. They can sit this one out and when they get to heaven their life will really begin. Still others see their own personal failings to be the person they believe God wants them to be – and they give up as well.

But Paul said, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Behold the past is gone; everything has become fresh and new." Do you remember the new song we've been learning in worship: "We're gonna shine like the sun in the Kingdom of Heaven . . . and no one will ever be the same"? We're gonna walk with the weak . . . and no one will ever be the same. We're gonna drink new wine . . . and no one will ever be the same. Anyone recall the final verse? The final verse begins, "And it all starts now!" You see, you don't need to be re-baptized; you just need the Holy Spirit to re-energize you.

In a moment you'll have that opportunity as you're invited to participate in a little ceremony called "A Renewal of My Baptismal Covenant."

It comes from a section in our Presbyterian Book of Order and The Directory for Worship. Here is how the introduction reads: "Presbyterians have consistently confessed two fundamental convictions with respect to baptism. First, baptism calls us to lead a life of commitment to God's will, a life of Christian discipleship. Second, regardless of when we are baptized, our life as Christians after baptism will never be as totally committed as it should be. We never live up fully to the claim upon us that is part of baptism. Consequently, repentance, renewal and recommitment are an on-going part of Christian discipleship." (p.65, *Holy Baptism and Services for the Renewal of Baptism, Supplemental Liturgical Resource 2*).

Martin Luther was baptized as an infant on the feast day of St. Martin; that's how he got his name. But as Luther grew up whenever he felt his faith was weakening, or the challenge of evil threatened him, he would remember his baptism saying, 'I am baptized,' and he would find new strength and courage to go on."

Each time we witness the baptism of a child or an adult, we are given an opportunity to renew our baptism covenant. Today we also have a wonderful opportunity to do that as well. Why might this be an important thing for you to do? What are some of the occasions that might prompt you to want to do so? Perhaps you grew up in a Christian home or in the church but something happened to interrupt your growth in Christ. Maybe a marriage that took you in a different direction, a painful experience that caused you to reject God. But now you've returned to faith and you want a way to symbolize your recommitment. Or perhaps these past few months have marked a new level of growth in your life as a Christian, or you've sensed a calling to a particular ministry. The renewal of your baptism vows can celebrate this wonderful time in your life. Or perhaps you've been ill and you wonder whether this year may well be the final year of life. Perhaps you need a renewed sense of Christ's presence; that he is with you in our suffering and weakness; and will be at your death. For all of these reasons we want to provide this experience of renewing the commitment you made to Christ, and he made to you at your baptism.

So if you're ready, would you take out your worship bulletin and join with me as we enter into this time of recommitment and spiritual renewal. (follow service/liturgy inserted in worship bulletin).