**[1]** First Sunday After Epiphany – Lord’s Baptism (Jan 12, 2025)
Sermon Title: Passing Through the Waters
Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7
Theme: Engaging the Six Traditions of Spiritual formation (Contemplative, Holiness, Charismatic, Social Justice, Evangelical, Incarnational)

**[2]** I was baptized on April 7, 1963 by Rev. A. O. Guy; I remember Rev. Guy lighting a single candle at the front of the sanctuary as a symbol for me that this event was not an end but a beginning, and he challenged me to “keep the candle burning,” as I grew in my Christian life and faith. The lighting of a single candle for each one baptized that day was a common custom in our small-town Oklahoma church. It was distinct from, yet very similar to the lighting of two candles on the Communion Table each Sunday. Within the theology of our denomination, as well as within the larger church family, the lighting of the candles on the communion table was designed to create a remembrance of our baptism, each one individually, in addition to the traditional remembrance of Jesus and his life of service and sacrifice. According to Rev. Colbert Cartwright, who, as a Disciple clergyman, wrote several books on the Lord’s Table, the two candles also signify a two-fold presence at the Table of “Prophet” and “Priest.” One presence to challenge, one presence to provide pastoral care; both being present whenever we gather at the table; the prayer for the bread to provide comfort; the prayer for the wine to move us into advocacy for others. Both Matthew and Luke record the following about Jesus’ baptism by John.

“I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; … He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Mt. 3:11; Lk 3:16; Mk. 1:8) Mark leaves out the reference to “fire.”

**[3]** And our biblical tradition recalls a difference between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus, what some have called the difference between “water baptism” and “Holy Spirit baptism.”
And here is where we need to be very careful about our wording. John 3:22 records a short sentence about Jesus performing some baptisms in the Judean countryside. We are not given any more information than this, so we are left with more questions than answers related to the
theological differences in these two types of baptism. And the Apostle Paul downplays the role of baptism in his career, stating he was not sent to baptize, but instead to preach the gospel, even though there is substantial evidence that Paul did perform some baptisms in his career (Lydia, Philippian jailor, and their households to name a few (1 Cor 1:14-15). And Paul himself was baptized by Ananias in Damascus. And to add even more nuance to the topic, Peter and John are dispatched to Samaria to correct what they understood as a deficiency in the baptisms performed by Philip, which Luke describes as “a baptism in the name of Jesus,” but without the Holy Spirit, as strange as that may sound to our ears. So, we do need to be careful in our thinking and our
language on this topic, and when we discuss the Lord’s Baptism. Our theologies are not clear
with regard to baptism, as an institution or ordinance, or a sacrament. And Disciples have held different views over the course of years on this topic; although the notion of sacrament is definitely gaining ground in popularity. What does it mean to remember our baptism as we partake of the Lord’s Supper or Communion? In modern times, we Disciples have only loosely coupled the two institutions, ordinances, or sacraments together; not tightly coupled them. In more recent history, all are invited to partake, not just the baptized, not just believers.

I still think it is helpful to remember my baptism when I approach the Lord’s Table; I would, however, not call it a requirement, just a friendly suggestion, but only if it helps. And by baptism, I do not mean “baptizing into our way of thinking or being,” but rather “baptizing into a life of service and love” exemplified by Jesus the Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

**[4]** Ralph Wilburn writes: “we should not take any sacrament, ordinance, or institution too seriously in the sense that they become “instruments of exclusion.” (Ralph Wilburn, “A Critique of the Restoration Principle”, Volume 1, Panel of Scholars report).  “The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are special because God acts through them and makes them available to all people, not just a few.  It is not necessary to wait for an experience of the Holy Spirit before participating in these sacraments; the sacraments themselves may convey such an experience or the experience may come at a different time and place.  The efficacy of these sacraments does not depend on the one leading the service or the one receiving the service, except for the latter being receptive to the action of God in these sacraments.”

Today’s scripture from Isaiah (or should we say Second Isaiah, understanding that Isaiah can be divided into at least three parts)… today’s scripture gives us several strong metaphors that we can use in connection with baptism. First, the words: “I have called you by name, you are mine.”
Baptism is a very personal call for response. This is consistent with the words: “you are precious in my sight.” And “You are honored in my sight.” And “I love you,” and “I formed you and made you.” All these phrases from Isaiah are very appropriate in our Pastor’s classes for baptism. And, also, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.” Yes, baptism is a sacrament, and that means something happens inside the event to change us from one status to another. But, at the same time, God is with us during the entire event as we go through the change. This is where the theology gets difficult for some of us. How can it be both at the same time? That is what some in the past have called “Paradox.” In geometrical terms, it is ellipse, not circle, an ellipsoid, not sphere. There are two focal points which determine any ellipse, and both are critical to its definition. The presence of two candles on the Communion Table; the identification of a single candle for each one baptized into Christ Jesus.

In 1 Peter 3:21, we find a strange word used in the description of Christian baptism, and a strange word to the Bible in a general sense as well.  The Greek word is αντιτυπον (antitypon) and it was used more frequently in the church at the time of Augustine (300s CE). Loosely translated, it describes something called a “comparison story”.  And there are very good reasons, we avoid the “antitype” methods of translation today; these antitypes can be very misleading and confusing when we engage the Scriptures as well as the Gospels. Antitypes are not very helpful when it comes to critically studying the Bible. But, if you have a poet’s heart and mind, and can keep a proper perspective on “antitype” as a type of literature, then it can provide for some interesting crossovers in your spiritual life. Let me give an example.

The specific story being compared to baptism in this verse of scripture from 1 Peter 3:21 is the story of Noah and the Ark.  We are told that Noah and his family ( eight persons )  were “saved through water” (διεσωθησαν δι’ υδατος ).  In modern hymnology, baptism is compared to a “passing through the waters.” In our General Assembly theme for 1983, in the lyrics of Avery and Marsh, baptism was intentionally described as a “passing through the waters” not unlike the story of the Exodus or the story of the return from Babylon. So, there is an example from the time period of Augustine that uses an early form of this antitype. Quoting now from Augustine:

“For even its (Noah’s ark) very dimensions, in length, and breadth, and height, represent the human body in which He came, as it has been foretold.  For the length of the human body, from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot, is six times its breadth from side to side, and ten times its depth or thickness, measuring from back to front.  (The ark was 300 cubits in length, 50 in breadth, and 30 in height.)  And its having a door made in the side of it certainly signified the wound which was made when the side of the Crucified was pierced with the spear, for by this those who come to Him enter.”  (Augustine, City of God, chapter 26).

Do you get the idea of the antitype from this example? Imagine with me, if you will, that our baptism is being compared with a journey of discovery, metaphorically sailing in an ark, shaped in the form of Jesus, over the waves of life. Our baptism is not just one moment in time, but a journey over a period of time, in other words, a beginning but not an end. This is what our Methodist friends would call “sanctification” added onto “justification.”

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. The rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire, you shall not be burned.” Is. 43:2

The tradition we have inherited suggests that baptism, as a sacrament, ordinance, or institution, is NOT only a public confession of faith in Christ and a public declaration of God’s forgiveness and grace, followed by faithful commitment to serving others, NOT only marks the beginning of a life-long experience of transformation through nurture and love, BUT is also what we have called “an acted parable,” a living oracle, or teaching opportunity in the midst of the community of faith. Our tradition records baptism and the Lord’s Supper as “spiritual opportunities,” rather than obligations; they are life-giving and life-sustaining.

“you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor. 6:11)

Alexander Campbell would also call baptism a “political act,” that each believer being baptized was a declaration of independence from the state churches in Europe, who required infant baptism in a church sponsored by the state. This simple act would start us on a journey of discovery of the will of God, and once we pledged our loyalty to Christ, our lives would be changed forever; each encounter with injustice, poverty, hunger would tug at our heart strings in ways that we could not have imagined before our baptism.

**[5]** And, consistent with the two candles on the communion table, baptism was also an act of pastoral care. Dr. Joretta Marshall, now retired Pastoral Care Professor at Brite Divinity School, in her 2008 Davis Ministry Lecture highlighted this idea for us: “while restoration is a theme sounded by all religions, the hard work of forgiveness is the heart of the gospel and a process that is unique to Christianity.”  Even though we are held accountable for our sins, through the sacrament of baptism, we are no longer held hostage to our sins—in the words of Romans 6:6, “ no longer enslaved to sin.”  We rise from the waters to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

Is it not interesting that the Hebrew word “kacah” carries with it a sense of being “overwhelmed” with the need for cover.  The term seems to beg us for the symbolism of submersion—the privacy of being under water followed by the publicity of the new life that emerges in Christ Jesus, forgiven and glowing in the light of honesty and truth (ειλικρινειας και αληθειας ;  “judged by sunlight” sincerity and truth 1 Cor 5:6-8).  The Hebrew word for “pardon” is also the word for “lift” (nacah): As an act of pastoral care, baptism should never be viewed as a “weapon”—it should always be viewed as a sacramental sanctuary of peace.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:7, Paul says that he worked among the church members as a “nurse”, with “gentleness” and “care”.  The early churches took seriously the call to nurture those recently baptized; instruction was not a perpetual altar call, but was instead threaded through with a call to nurture those who had been baptized, especially those who had just recently begun the journey of faith. And, so too, WOCC is taking seriously the call to nurture newness in our community through the Fruit of the Spirit activities scheduled for this Spring 2025. Stay tuned for more information on this special activity being planned by our elders.

**[6]** Over the past few decades, Richard Foster has given us a deep-dive into spiritual formation called Renovaré which seeks to provide an intergenerational and non-denominational approach to seeking and living out our faith: He lists six traditions we should engage as our legacy in planning the future of our communities of faith: The Contemplative, the Holiness, the Charismatic, the Social Justice, Evangelical and Incarnational traditions. Each has its own set of challenges and strengths to offer us in our pursuit of more wholeness in our faith journey. Collectively, they form what he calls the “streams of living water.” In our journey of faith after baptism, we each navigate these streams as our spiritual foundations are formed. The heart of the
Renovaré worship experience, to revive and renew our Spirits, within smalls groups, is to hold each other accountable for the next steps in our individual formations. Modeled after the long and well-regarded Stephen Ministries, Renovaré calls for longer-term spiritual commitments to learning and service.

**[7]** Of the hymn, “Together on Our Knees”, Rosa Page Welsh writes “This is one of the rare songs of the slaves that speak of Communion.  It is a call to Holy Communion and blessed Fellowship… This song plumbs the depths of the real meaning of Holy Communion when it gives this simple invitation in love to all who would hear and respond. “It calls us away from our blackness and whiteness, from our pride and vanity, from our selfishness and exclusiveness to a oneness in loving service…Calling us to our knees was not only humility before God, but also humility before one another” (p. 36, *The Untold Story: A Short History of Black Disciples,* William K. Fox, Rosa Page Welsh, and others, 1976)[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. *The Untold Story* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1976) William K. Fox, Hap Lyda, Lorenzo J. Evans, R. H. Peoples, C. C. Mosley, Sr., James L. Blair, William Joseph Barber, Sr., Kenneth E. Henry, Ann E. Dickerson, Rosa Page Welsh
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