
Baptism: waking to new life
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 3:13-17 and Romans 6:3-4

Someone in this congregation requested that perhaps I could try to preach a more conventional sermon sometime. That perhaps I could focus more on the comforting aspects of the gospels. You know. Instead of lifting up the more challenging aspects of faith which is clearly more my style. And early in the week I tried to do that. Really. I tried really hard. But then I remembered - when have I ever given you what you asked for? And I hope you know, I have never failed to give you what you asked for. Because to be honest - I've never even tried to do that.

Fortunately for us all, this week is the celebration of Jesus's baptism. Surely that topic will not lead us to anything challenging, right? To begin, think of what we just read from Matthew about Jesus being baptized by John. What sort of image do you conjure up in your mind? I would expect that for most of us, that scene is very pastoral. Perhaps you imagine something like this:

[image: pastoral scene]

We might imagine the Jordan River flowing very peacefully past grasslands. Perhaps we imagine sheep and other animals frolicking playfully, almost like pets. Take a moment to experience this scene. Smell the grass. Hear the rustle of the leaves in the trees. Take off your sandals and feel the warmth of the soil beneath your feet. It's very peaceful, right? Even Rev. Paul cannot mess this one up.

But I need to ask a question. It's a very simple question, really. The question is, what is baptism all about? But before you answer, I want to show you some baptism images:

[image: images of baptism and water]

So - what is baptism all about? Is anyone going to say, "water"? I hope so, because that is what we have been taught in the church our whole lives. In classic Christian thinking, baptism also was the doorway to heaven. But the actual action of

baptism seems to always require water. I mean, of course it's about water - what else is the font for? It is not for making coffee! Trust me. I've tried. It tasted terrible. And of course we do use water during baptisms here.

[Go see what is in the baptismal font.]

In some churches they add a drop of olive oil to the baptismal water to symbolize anointing and healing. Presumably to make the water more special. In some churches they add a small amount of water that came directly from the Jordan River to the baptismal water. Presumably to make the water more special. In some churches, the water is blessed by the minister. Presumably to make the water more special. In some churches they use distilled water for baptism. With the idea that baptismal waters cannot contain any impurities. Presumably to make the water more special. In some churches they use Holy Water. Presumably to make the water more special.

[image: tap water]

But here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church - at least while I've been here - we have only used straight Brantford tap water for baptisms. Unfiltered. Unsoftened. Un-anythinged. Straight tap water.

There are 2 reasons we use ordinary tap water. For one thing, baptism is really the single most important ritual in the Christian church. It is special by design. So I resist any attempts to make it "more special". Because in my mind that just is not possible. I figure if baptism is not special enough for you already, then perhaps you don't understand what baptism is all about. And the other reason why we use ordinary tap water is because baptism is not about water anyway. It's about something far less tangible, and far more important. It's about something very common. As common like tap water.

But hey - don't take my word for it. We can take the words of St. Paul, arguably the author of Christianity. St. Paul certainly knew what baptism meant in the early church. Consider what St. Paul said about baptism in Romans. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death. So that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."¹ And

¹ Romans 6:3-4 NRSV.

look at that - a discussion of baptism from St. Paul with 0 mention of water. Not a single reference to water. Not a single drop of water. But I hope you noticed the 3 references to death. Instead of hearing about water at baptism, we hear about death. We hear about dying to an old way of life and walking into a new way of life. That is what baptism is all about.

Baptism is not about water. It is only - and has always only been - about walking into new life. It has always been about recognizing and responding to the opportunity to choose.

[image: new life vs old life]

To choose between clinging onto our past, or living into our future. In other words, baptism - at its core - is about healing, journey, and community. Baptism is about living in the present moment.

[image: baptize = baptizo with definition]

Now before anyone corrects me, I will point out that the Greek word in the Bible for baptize is baptizo, which means immerse, submerge, or “put into”². If you want to insist that baptism is about water by arguing that immersion implies water, be my guest. But I will counter with the idea that you can also immerse yourself in new life. You can submerge yourself into new opportunities. You can “put into” your own future.

I find it very interesting that the lectionary gives us these readings today. Because the whole idea of dying to one way of life and walking into a new way of life fits so well today because it is the beginning of a new year.

[image: new year new me]

And because people are still emerging from the collective cocoon known as the pandemic. It’s true. One of our members was present in the building for worship last week for the first time since the pandemic. And she is not alone. We are still in the process of “coming back”. And that is wonderful. Now is a great time to live new life.

[image: new leaves and light]

It is time to reflect on who and what this church really is and what we want to do as we move forward and continue to be and bring the kingdom of God in Brantford. It is

² <https://www.ucg.org/the-good-news/baptism-beginning-of-a-new-life>

time to give our passions and energy some room to engage. It's time to continue our journey. It's time to spread our wings. It's time to grow in whatever direction the light leads us.

[image: very lost]

Now, I am not nuts. I know that this part of the journey is not really pleasant. Right now, we all have a pretty good sense of what we have lost during the pandemic. What know perhaps what part of us needs to die away. But at the same time we do not know very much about that future that we are being invited into. So this is the least pleasant part of the journey. The part of the journey with maximum uncertainty. The part of the journey when we feel completely lost.

[image: completely lost you get found]

But of course, none of us need to worry. Because most things are not actually changing for us. At the conclusion of this service you know that I will blow out the Christ candle. And I will declare as I often do that the candle never mattered anyway. Because Christ will continue to be present with us, in us, and through us. And I say those same words every week because I happen to think that they are true.

That tension between the past and the future is not new. The call to new life is not new either. I invite you to take your mind back 2000 to the pastoral scene from earlier.

[image: pastoral image]

Imagine if you will what baptism might have felt like 2000 years ago. Picture yourself as one of the disciples. And imagine that you have decided that today you will come forward to be baptized in the river. And imagine that you have just done that. You have just emerged from the waters and are standing on the shore, dripping wet, a light breeze cooling you off refreshingly. How do you feel? Hopefully, good. Do you know what comes next? No. Do you know what the future holds? No. Do you even know what to do right now? No. The new life of baptism does not come to us in a flash. It is something we grow into, we breathe into, we walk into. The invitation to new life at baptism does not mean that we have all the answers right at that moment. Baptism simply means that we have decided to move forward. And that we are ready to take a single step in that direction.

[image: every journey begins with a single step]

Baptism is walking into new life. But for many of us, that image of walking into new life seems a bit vague. I mean, where are we supposed to walk? Are we trying to go somewhere? We are already here after all.

So another way to think of it is that we do not need to walk at all. Instead, we need to wake.

[image: seedling]

We need to wake into new life. We do not need to create anything new. We do not need to start from scratch. We just need to wake up to possibilities that are all around us already. Because the new life that we are all invited into is in fact already present.

[image: new lens]

Perhaps “We do not need a new life. We just need a new lens through which to view the life we already have.” And what is that new lens? The lens we need is to move towards the light. We need to look towards where we find energy, healing, hope. We need to go where our energy, our passions, and our interests take us.

[image: socrates]

We do however need to let go of some aspects of our past. If we put all of our energy into our past, we will not be able to build the new. Too much energy in this congregation goes into complaining about things. And the complaints often simply boil down to saying that the present is not the same as the past. And of course, the fact that the present is not the past is not a problem that can be fixed. We need to redirect our energies. We need to put our energy into our future.

[image: seedling]

The present is not the past. That is a simple fact. But as human beings it is easy to get drawn into comparing the present with the past and to find the present wanting. This problem is made worse because we often idealize our past memories. And we often disasterize the present.

The solution is to stop comparing the present to the past. Period. Instead, simply embrace the gifts of the present moment for what they are.

This approach can be applied anywhere. In the church - instead of criticizing

something happening in worship today that does not fit what you remember from your past, embrace the opportunities being offered here and now. In your work, instead of resisting changes to the job environment learn to appreciate the new opportunities and learnings around you. In your families, as family members age and change, instead of longing for the past, embrace the gift of each person as they are right now. Stop dreaming about your past and instead embrace the present that you have.

The new life of baptism should not feel threatening. It is not something that we need to fear. It is simply the process of waking up to the reality already in our midst, including the presence of God in our midst. The water, and the candle, these things do not matter. What matters is that Christ is present with us, in us, and through us.

How will we make Christ present this year? Think about it. We have a whole year to live out the answer together.

Amen.