

Today is a special Sunday in the church year,
the Feast of the baptism of Jesus,
and we celebrate this feast for a number of reasons.

One is that Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his earthly ministry.
A second is because that beautiful moment when he comes up
out of the water is one of the few moments in scripture
when God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit
all manifest to humanity at the same time.

Third, it's a time for us to remember our own baptisms, and fourth,
it's a day for baptizing new members into the Body of Christ.

And so today we're baptizing 2 precious little babies, Brady and Iris.
A lot of you already know Brady,
or at least know his parents Thad and Jen,
and his big brother Luther.
They've been part of Holy Trinity for years.

We've just recently met Iris and and her parents Laura and Tim.
They were both raised in the church
and now they want to share their faith with their child.

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All this has me remembering my own baptism,
from back when I was 8 years old.

Now, in my church growing up we didn't talk a whole lot about baptism.
Mostly, to us kids it just looked like like a lot of fun.

In fact, every summer at Church Camp up in Toccoa
we would pretend-baptize each other in Lake Louise.

We would mimic our pastors, holding up one hand in the air
and baptizing thee my brother or thee my sister
in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost,
and then “whoosh!”, down into the lake.

Baptism WAS important at my church, but we didn’t talk about it a lot.
That’s because baptism was just the thing you did after you got saved,
and we talked about getting saved A LOT.

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Maybe you know about being saved.

If you grew up in a more evangelical part of the church,
being saved was THE critical moment,
the moment of decision when you asked Jesus
to come into your life and be your savior,
to literally save you from an eternity of torment.

But if you grew up in a LESS evangelical part of the church,
you might have been taught to look down on the idea of being saved,
to think of it as, at best, an act of catharsis,
or at worst, emotional manipulation.

You might have been told it was the thing hypocrites did
to have their sins forgotten as well as forgiven.

You might even been told it was the way THOSE CHRISTIANS do things.

By the way, if you didn’t grow up in the church at all, I apologize.

These distinctions might not mean anything to you.

Hopefully you’ll still find some good news in this sermon.

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The hardest part about the idea of being saved
is the way so much of the Church divides itself over the issue.

Too often the parts of the Church who REQUIRE that powerful,
individual moment of conversion look down their noses
at the parts of the church who don't...

AND the parts of the Church who baptize infants and trust in the slow,
incremental work of the Spirit...
too often we both look down our noses at the other side, too.

We have not built up the Body of Christ with those attitudes.
We have not built up the Body of Christ with these divisions.
Especially because our skepticism of one another's faithfulness,
it's not really about theology
so much as about divisions of class and education and culture.

The truth is, both types of Christian initiation
are alive in the traditions of the church.
Both types of initiation have solid theological grounding,
and have deep roots in scripture, theology, and reason.

Both have produced deeply faithful sisters and brothers in Christ,
and both have had their share of frauds and hypocrites.

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Done well, both traditions teach us to reach out to Jesus.

When you have a conversion experience - when you are saved -
you have this singular moment of repentance,
a singular moment you can remember
when you called out for a Savior
and heard that call answered.

The fullness of life in Christ has been waiting for you until this moment,
until you claim it as a mature human being.

Like the Ethiopian eunuch. Like John Newton. Like Cornelius.

But...when you baptized as an infant,
you are effectively born into the church.

You grow up never having known a time
when you weren't fully a part of the Body of Christ,
and what a profound gift THAT is.

So this theological debate over the "correct" way to enter the Church
goes back at least 500 years,
but as someone who lived the first part of my life in one tradition
and the second in another,

I can say that this division...it's mostly an illusion.

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I was saved...on July 14, 1977.

It was a morning service in the middle of our Revival week.

In the language of that church,

I and a few other kids had reached the Age of Accountability,
so I walked up to the front of my church,
got down on my knees, and asked Jesus to be my Savior.

The next Sunday I was baptized in a pool made of cement blocks
that was dug into the ground behind the church.

I had to stay on my tiptoes to keep the water out of my nose.

The pastor said all the same things

us kids had been saying when we pretended to baptize each other
in Lake Louise.

Afterwards we stood in front of the church
and asked to be received as members.

It never occurred to me to ask why I needed to join a church
I had been a part of my whole life.

Once they voted us in, the entire church came up and shook our hands.
They extended what we called the Right Hand of Christian Fellowship.
It was a powerful moment for me, a profound experience.

I had repented of my sins. I had accepted Jesus. I had been saved.

But had I really?

I was eight years old. What exactly was I repenting of?

And, I had never known a time when that church wasn't my home
or when I didn't believe that God loved me,
so what exactly was I converting from or converting to?

That moment of being saved was an individual one,
but it was also part of a whole ritual of revival services.

The preaching and prayers and especially the music
were all designed to bring me to that altar.

The mothers & grandmothers had identified who was "ready,"
and then prayed and quietly nudged us to our decisions.

And finally...and I say this without any embarrassment,
this was the summer the original Star Wars movie came out.
I saw it 7 times that summer,
so it's very possible that in 1977 my religious imagination
was sparked by the Force as much as by the Holy Spirit.

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My point is that every individual decision comes
in the context of community action.

So in the lived-reality of life in the Church,
the divisions between evangelical and liturgical Christianity,
between infant baptism and believers baptism,
between being saved on July 14, 1977
and being saved on Good Friday,
these are mostly about our own cultural identities,
not about God.

When I was 8 years old,
I was no more capable of making a mature profession of faith
than I was of understanding what following Jesus
was going to mean to my future self as a 16 year old
or a 36 year old, or God willing, an 86-year old.

I couldn't understand the theology then,
and I sure didn't know who I would be as an adult.

But...I did know one thing, and it was enough:
Even at 8 years old, I knew deep in my bones that Jesus loved me,
that Jesus had died for me, and been resurrected for me.

I didn't know the theology OR the psychology or sociology behind it...
but I knew what I was doing.

I was asking Jesus to come into my life.
Even at 8 years old, I knew what that was.
Just like our kids in Godly Play do today.

I asked Jesus to come into my life,
and for almost 50 years I have staked my life
on the belief that Jesus answered me.

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Today we're asking Iris and Brady's parents & godparents
if they will promise to raise these children
in the knowledge and love of the Lord,
and then we're going to ask all of you
if you will renew your commitment to Jesus as Lord.

There's no way any of us can really know what saying yes to Jesus
is going to mean in our lives, now or in the future.

But we do know this:
if you want Jesus to be a part of your life, ask him.
He will come. He will.