

*The Baptism of the Lord & Confirmation Sunday*  
**January 10, 2010**  
**St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Boerne, Texas**  
**David M. Evans, Interim Pastor**

*When You Pass Through the Waters*

Luke's account of Jesus' baptism is very sparse. In fact Jesus' baptism is simply one of many other baptisms that day. We are given very few of the details that make Jesus' baptismal story so rich in the other gospels. Luke does not tell us that Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, baptized Jesus. Luke does not tell us that Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan. Luke simply tells us that the people's hopes were beginning to rise because of the preaching of John the Baptist and then John was imprisoned by Herod. Only then was Jesus baptized and only then did the voice from heaven confirm Jesus as God's beloved Son.

Listen for the Word of God as it is recorded in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the gospel of Luke:  
***Luke 3:15-22***

A few weeks ago I received a package in the mail from a long-time friend with the request that I write a letter of reference for her grandson, Jacob, to Austin College, that fine Presbyterian college in Sherman, Texas. I haven't seen JoBeth in a couple of years, but I remembered sitting at her kitchen table one afternoon a few years ago as we reminisced about the events that had drawn us together. She told me that her daughter, whom I had baptized early in my ministry, had moved to West Texas a few years before and now had four children. When Melissa moved to Lubbock they joined a Presbyterian Church. But later on they moved to the little town of Abernathy about 15 miles north of Lubbock. There is no Presbyterian church in Abernathy so they joined the United Methodist Church.

Soon after moving to Abernathy, their oldest child, Jacob, was invited to participate in the Confirmation Class at their new church. All went well through the weeks of preparation of confirmation. Until the very last week. During the class that last week the pastor of the church asked each of the young people: *"Is there anything you need to repent of before you are confirmed?"* Most of the young people looked down at the ground and shuffled their feet. Jacob, however, politely but confidently told the pastor: *"I am a baptized child of the covenant. Jesus has already taken care of my sins."*

Now I am not picking on the Methodists, because this could have happened in a Presbyterian Church. Yet this is language and this is theology that one typically learns in Reformed churches. What Jacob understood clearly is that when he was baptized he was claimed as a child of the covenant. And from that moment on until his baptism is fulfilled at his death, Jacob will live with the confidence that **he counts now**.

In Flannery O'Connor's short story *The River* we meet little Harry Ashfield, only four or five years old. As Harry made his way to the River that afternoon with Mrs. Connin, his new baby-sitter holding his hand, he considered how lucky he was. Mrs. Connin was not like the other baby-sitters his mother and father usually got for him when they went into one of their drunken stupors. Mrs. Connin told him things and took him places. Already that morning Mrs. Connin had told him that "*he had been made by a carpenter named Jesus Christ.*" Always before Harry had been led to believe that he had been made by the fat old doctor with the yellow mustache who gave him shots. But that morning Harry had seen a picture hanging in Mrs. Connin's living room...a picture of a man wearing a sheet...and he wondered who he was. Mrs. Connin had just looked at him for a long time with her mouth open. Finally she said: "*That's Jesus.*"

Now Mrs. Connin was taking him to a healing service at the River. Once there Mrs. Connin had lifted Harry up on her shoulders so that he could see the Rev. Bevel Summers. And that's when it happened. Mrs. Connin asked Harry if he had ever been baptized. Harry had no idea what she meant.

"*Have you ever been Baptized?*" the fierce-looking preacher asked Harry.

"*What's that?*" Harry murmured.

"*If I Baptize you,*" the preacher said, "*you'll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you'll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?*"

"*Yes,*" the child said.

"*You won't be the same again,*" the preacher said. "*You'll count.*"

And then without warning the preacher tightened his hold on Harry and swung him upside down and plunged his head into the water. He held him there while he said the words of Baptism and then he jerked him up again and looked sternly at the gasping child.

"*You count now,*" the preacher said. "*You didn't even count before.*"

I have no recollection of my own baptism. If my parents are to be believed...and neither one of them is genetically capable of telling an untruth...I was baptized by the Rev. Joe Russell at the First Presbyterian Church of Garland sometime in the fall of 1947. Thus I have no recollection of my baptism. I do have a copy of the Session minutes that recorded my baptism. But on those rare occasions when I am able to return to the church of my childhood and youth...the church that baptized me and confirmed me and ordained me...I am still able to find a few people who can say:

"*I was there the day you were baptized and I made promises to you that day.*"

One of them, Maureen Bickle, fulfilled that promise by teaching the Primary age Sunday School class when I was in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grades. Maureen died recently, but when she turned 80 a few years ago, I wrote her a letter to thank her for her efforts in keeping the promise to me that she made at my baptism. Each Sunday I came away from her class knowing that I was a beloved child of God. The clear message was: ***You count now.***

That was the preacher's message to Harry Ashfield the day his head was roughly shoved into the muddy waters of a southern river. **You count now.** And in the 62 years since the Rev. Joe Russell sprinkled that water over my head and said the words of baptism, I have come to know, sometimes more deeply than at other times, that the message of baptism is **You count now.** You count now because you were created from the dust of the earth by a loving God who made you in God's own image and breathed the very breath of life into you and gave you the ability to love and to be thankful and to be passionate about life.

Just because my baptism is not engraven into my own personal memory bank like Harry Ashfield's baptism was engraven into his does not mean that I do not remember my baptism. In fact, remembering that I am indeed baptized and attempting every day of my life to live into my baptism is the most important work I do. For in my baptism I...and in your baptism...we were all the recipients of the most important gift we will ever receive. God said to us: **You count now.** Once you were nobody. Now you are God's.

Perhaps you grew up in a biological family where you rarely, if ever, heard the message: **You count now.** But I am here to witness this morning that now you have an identity as a child of God that says: **You count now.** And more than that you have received the supreme call of the abundant life which is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Living your baptism annihilates the innate sense of selfishness and egocentricity and replaces it with the gift of a life in the Spirit....life for God...life for others.

That is the reason why I have never had any theological problem with the question that seems to bother so many. That is, if Jesus is the Son of God why did he have to be baptized? It is clear to me that Jesus...the Suffering Servant of God...wanted to show us the way...the way from self to God. The way from being a nobody to being someone who counts in the heart of God.

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Now to the Ruler of all worlds, undying, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever! AMEN