

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Sacramental Gifts

Sermon: What's On Your Wall?

Genesis 1:1-2, 6-10

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

6 And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." 7 So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. 8 God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

9 And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. 10 God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

Mark 1:1-11

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, 2 as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way"—

3 "a voice of one calling in the wilderness,

'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Sermon

Think about all of the tangible reminders in your life that are associated with your name. You have your driver's licence, your social security number, your credit card numbers, your phone number, telemarketers definitely know who you are, you can't even right a check anymore without three sets of identification, your thumb print, blood type, and your DNA codes. Our world is geared toward people's identity. Marketers try to tell you that your identity would be much better today if you bought their product. We judge people by their houses and their cars and make opinions of the identity of other people. Matter of fact, our occupation is the first thing we identify ourselves with. If you were to meet someone for the first time, you would ask them their name, and then the huge question that we always ask: "What do you do for a living". Who we are is wrapped up in what we do. It's hard to protect and validate our identity sometimes. For example, years ago I lost my driver's licence in Chicago. Have you ever lost your driver's licence? It's an awful feeling of losing your personhood, of having no tangible evidence of who you are. I went down to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get another licence, and they told me I needed to get my birth certificate. So I went to the Department of

Vital Stats to get my birth certificate. I filled out a form to get my birth certificate, and before they could give it to me, they said that they wanted to see my driver's licence. You can't win.

To find out the identity of another person, I like to look at their walls in their house. What is on your wall? Do you have pictures? Do you have mirrors or posters? Do you have posted, for all of your visitors to see, things that you are proud of, like diplomas or a medal from the war? A picture of your grandson in his baseball uniform or your daughter on the volleyball court in her first game as varsity? Indeed, our walls show us a great deal about who we are. My first apartment, the time I could decorate my own place, I had a poster of Chicago, an aviation map of Nebraska, a Certificate I received for Cross Country, and my high school diploma. My walls tell others what makes me tick, what I like and dislike. To be honest, for a while, I did have a poster of Kathy Ireland on my door. Some of you are too old or too young to know who she was, but she was on my wall. Then I got engaged, and well, that was one less thing on my wall. Which isn't fair, Steph had Harry Connick Jr on her wall and he got to stay. Hmmmmmm. I ask you what do you have on your walls because your walls display an outer sign of what's inside you. And this is what our Gospel lesson is all about this morning. An outer sign of who we are as Christians. We're talking about our identity. We're talking about our baptism.

There are many theologies on baptism and what it really is. Like Communion we discussed last week, it has splintered churches and divided friends in the history of our tradition. Baptists believe that the whole body must be immersed, while we Methodists just sprinkle the head. Very conservative groups believe that a person is doomed to eternal fire and brimstone if not baptized while liberal groups laugh at the idea. Simply put, baptism is the sacrament of initiation and incorporation into the body of Christ, into the church. It is our first step into church membership, it is the rite of passage in claiming your identity as a child of God. It is...one strange ritual. Think about it...we are so use to the notion of baptism that it seems very natural. What if you have never heard of baptism before and see it done at a church service. You put water on somebody's head and they are suppose to be a different person? God is supposed to look down at this person favorably because they had a small shower in church one day? It makes sense to us because we grew up with it, seen it, and even took part in it. I wonder what it was like during the early years of baptism. How it was accepted and looked upon. Lets just imagine for a moment.

Imagine you're walking in the middle east long ago, lets say 2,000 years ago. You're walking along, minding your own business, when you see this man walking toward you and he's dressed in a cloak made of camel's hair, leather belt and he's munching on honey covered locusts. Bugs, this man is eating bugs. As first impressions go, this would not be a good start. This man is not normal. And what is he saying? "One will come after me, one whose sandal's I am not worthy to untie." After looking at him, we would hope someone else is coming, better than he. No offense to John the Baptist, but he would not fare well in today's world. So we strike up a conversation with him, and of course we ask the big question we talked about earlier, "What do you do?" And he would reply, "I baptize people". Now remember, we don't know what baptism is quite yet, so we would ask him. "What is baptism?" And as our scripture says this morning "I baptize for the repentance for the forgiveness of sins". "Not a bad idea", we would say, "How do you do it"? "First, you follow me into this river, Please don't mind the cold, freezing water. Please don't mind the fact that you cannot see the bottom because the Jordan is muddy, is filled with the desert sands, the fact that there are herds of cattle upstream so who knows what else is in the water, but never mind all that. You follow me into the river, you tell me your sins, whereas I would take you by the head and dunk you into this murky water." And we're suppose to thank him for doing this? I don't know about you, but in high school, we use to call this a swirlie. I don't mean to make fun of baptism, but you have to admit, it is a very unique ritual. It is a ritual of new life, of repentance of the old self and makes a new self, a new person. That is the purpose of rituals, to change lives, to make an impact on our daily living. That is what baptism is all about, it is our call to discipleship, to follow God's will for our lives. This ritual is the way we recognize God's grace in our lives and our response to follow that grace through faith. To take that challenge of Christian discipleship and strive for holy living.

So why is water used? Why do we use water as a sign of new life? It's no stretch of the imagination for those whose lives depend on farming that if your crops didn't have water, it was going to be a very tough year. The human body can only go a couple of days without water. Even before our birth, curled up inside a womb, we were surrounded by water. Water is life. Water is what sustains our existence. Without water...we die. If water is life, imagine the symbolism of water in baptism. Life giving power. Those early Christians knew the importance of water. No one in the Middle east says anything negative about water. And it goes much deeper in the tradition of scripture than most realize. Let me explain.

In the ancient world, their view of the earth was quite different from how we perceive the world. We have the benefit of satellite photos, globes, and maps. When we think of Earth, we can easily see a blue ball floating around in space. The ancient civilizations didn't have this knowledge of how the world really looked. This is how they perceived the world, as attested by ancient writings and even the old testament. In the beginning, God created a heaven and an Earth. Now the earth was formless, (much like a liquid), and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Other versions of the Bible use words like chaos, or face of the waters, but anywhere you look, there is reference to water. God is present in the water...or water is present in God, however you look at it. The creation story continues and God makes light. The next couple of verses after that God makes land. What we always overlook is the fact that nowhere in the creation story of the Bible does God make water. It's already present. What else is interesting is the location of water in their world view. Let me read the sixth and seventh verse of Genesis. "And God said 'let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water'". So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And God called the expanse "sky". Did you catch that? There is water below and above the sky. In the ancient people's minds, they were living on a frail piece of unstable property that was surrounded by chaotic water. If you think back to the story of Noah and the ark, the world was drowned because God let loose the floodgates of heaven, where all that water was above the sky, and did a reversal of creation and brought back the chaos that was before. Not only did they think they had water above them, they had oceans to contend with. Who knew what was on the other side, if there was one. Strange stories take place on the seas, even on large lakes. Because that's where was. God was on the water and God dwells over the deep, over the water. You didn't mess with the oceans because that was God's domain, God has power over the water, over the chaos of the deep. That is why Jesus's miracle of walking on the water was an amazing revelation. First, yes, it is indeed a miracle if someone can waltz across a lake, but secondly, Jesus was doing something that God does. God walks on water and hovers over the deep. To see this man Jesus doing the same is a powerful proclamation to the divineness of Jesus. When water is put into that context, you can see the richness of the importance of baptism. It is not the sprinkling of bottled Culligan Man H2O on someone who wants to join the church, but it is a profound symbol of how this person is washed clean by the presence of God. It is new life. God created the world out of water. God can create a new life in us with water. The Gospels are about the life of Jesus, and the book of Mark doesn't even have a birth story, but begins with Jesus' baptism. As far as the book of Mark is concerned, life begins at baptism.

Something interesting happened when Jesus was baptized so long ago that I would like to point your attention to. After Jesus came out of the water we heard God's voice speaking to Jesus. God said, "you are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Does this sound like a proud parent or what? "That's my boy, that's my son...just got baptized. Good kid." What I find interesting is that it is the only place in scripture where we find God telling his Son that he is proud of him. When Jesus kicked the merchants out of the temple, we didn't hear God saying "Way to go, Son, you get 'em." Or when he heals the blind, we never hear applause from the heavens. God would say "I will glorify your name" but we find no reference of his feelings of pride for Jesus. And this was in the beginning of Mark! Jesus hasn't even done anything yet...except get baptized! He hasn't healed anyone, fed anyone, saved anyone, he hadn't been killed and crucified yet, and he hasn't even risen from the dead yet. It was his baptism that got his dad's attention. Baptism made his father proud. Where are our priorities? Did our kids' baptism make us proud, their commitments, their character? Or do other actions make us proud?

When I was a freshman in high school, I went out for football. Why? First, I thought I would have fun. And secondly, I thought it would make my dad proud of me. He was good at football. I have two cousins who are good at football, college football national champion, now a head coach making a kabillion dollars. Their dad was and is still a football coach. Hey, it runs in the family, so I went out for it. What I failed to realize is that I was only a 130 pounds. We played 8-man football at our small school and I started playing at end. I couldn't block to save my life. My job was to block a 200 pound man-eater, who had nicknames like "blood" or "destroyer." I didn't stay at end very long. I was moved to quarterback where I didn't have to block anyone. My job was to throw, hand off, or run like heck. When I did run with the ball, I didn't want to get tackled because, well, its part of the game, but I think it was more for survival. After two seasons and a broken rib, I switched to Cross Country. My cousins inherited the football gene and all I got was a receding hair line. I did other things to make people proud of who I was. But what I didn't realize then was that God has a different standard. We measure success by points, awards, promotions, but God measures success by our commitment. Our commitment to taking that initiative into becoming disciples that can transform the world. Becoming disciples to create that Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. Becoming disciples that will say NO to the sin around us and grab hold of the truth in the Gospel of Life. Remember your baptism. If you were too young to remember, then know that you can still bask in the reality that you once took part in the ancient tradition of being washed clean by God's presence and made his own. Remember your baptism. You are a child of God. Remember your baptism. Jesus was baptized and God said "With you I am well pleased".

What do you have on your wall? Let me offer you another possibility. If our walls show us our accomplishments and if they show us who we are as people, I would encourage you to dig in your closets, to that old box of memories that you keep, and find your baptismal certificate and frame it in your home. If that sounds strange or even crazy, think about this...We put on our walls diplomas and other forms of achievements. Isn't the certificate of initiation into the Kingdom of God as valid as the earthly papers of human achievement? It took some finding, but the only tangible proof I have left of my own baptism is the church bulletin of that day so long ago. Just as my driver's licence is my tangible proof of my identity, this is my certificate that lets me know who I really am and what God calls me to be...a disciple of the Gospel. This program means a lot more to me now than it ever did before. This is what I can hold and keep to tell myself that I am a child of God, and that I accept that call to commitment and discipleship. And I can hope that if God ever had anything to say to me or to anyone of us, it would be "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

-Amen.