

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

It was a cold December 26th in the year 1982. It was Christmas time and we were back in a little town called Troxelville, which is located between two farms and next to nowhere in central Pennsylvania. This is the place my mom was born. She and my dad were gathered alongside my entire family to witness a life changing event for me. The little church we were gathered in was very meaningful to my mom's side of the family. My great great grandfather donated the land for the church to be built. My great grandparents, grandparents, and parents and all my aunts and uncles were married there. She and all her brothers and sisters were baptized, confirmed and took their first communion there. And here we were gathered around the white porcelain baptismal font waiting for God to place his claim over my life. It was such a special day. Or so I was told. You know, I don't even remember it. I mean sure, I've seen pictures. And from going to church and going through confirmation and seminary I know what happened between God and me that day based on Scripture, but I don't remember the day of my baptism. Do you? Do you remember the day that you were baptized? The day that God came down and placed his claim over your life? I would venture to say that for most of us, certainly not all of us, but for most of us we were baptized as babies and we don't remember the actual event except maybe by pictures or those baptismal certificates that are very popular. And so as I thought about our lesson for today, I couldn't help but wonder, how often do you think about your baptism and what it means for you?

If I'm honest with you I don't think about my baptismal day very often. But what we can notice in Jesus' baptism is that our baptismal day is a pretty big deal. You see Jesus was in the water, being baptized by John, when Scriptures tell us that the heavens were torn apart. Notice it

doesn't say they gently opened or were separated, the original Greek tells us they were torn, ripped even, apart. They were torn apart because God could not take the separation from Jesus or his people any longer. He was anxious and excited and more than ready to come to earth and claim his son, and claim us, his own creation.

In our baptism God gives us something the world doesn't. He gives us acceptance. He tells us that we belong to him and that we are valued just as we are, with no strings attached and no stipulations included. I believe that the gift of acceptance is something that we need, but it is something that we don't very often find in this world. A lot of times we get the false sense of acceptance. People accept us conditionally or even more often they affirm us. You know when I was growing up I didn't get a medal for participation. Now if you play on a soccer team or basketball team you get a trophy or medal. Why? What for? I guess they want to try and affirm your efforts. If you are on Facebook someone can "like" what you have to say or what pictures you provide for the world to see. But isn't that kind of a false acceptance or more of an affirmation? Because as soon as you say something they don't like they can unfriend you. That's different from acceptance.

In our baptisms God comes down and takes ordinary water, something needed to sustain everyday life, and God speaks through the word, the promises made in Scripture, and God becomes the hands of the pastor and God sprinkles that water on your head. He comes down and says, "You. You are mine forever. You are beautiful and wonderfully made. I'm so proud of you. I love you so much." And God makes the promise that he will never leave your side, through the good and the bad, the happy and the sad, the hard and the easy he will be right there next to you, holding you and caring for you and loving you. Loved. Accepted. Claimed. Forever.

It's an incredible gift, but God doesn't just stop there. God goes a step further. You see God always knows our hearts and what we need. God wants to provide you with a tangible way, a physical way that you can see his presence in your life, so baptism isn't designed as only an individual act. In the waters of baptism, you are also made a part of a family, a body of believers. These believers make a promise to you, the newly baptized, that they will walk alongside you on your faith journey. They promise to encourage you, to uplift you, to support you in times of despair. They pledge to love you and accept you and value you the way that you are, the way that God created to be. They promise to look at you and see God's good creation in you no matter what life may bring. When you are baptized, you are baptized into a family.

I remember being little and going into my mom's closet and picking out my favorite pair of her high heels, they were of course red and shiny. I remember going into her jewelry box and picking out her best clip on earrings, magenta and sparkly, that were my great grandmas, and my favorite strand of her long pearls and I remember dressing up hoping that I would be just like her, pretty and smart and successful. In the same way that I looked up to my mom, mimicking her behavior, God too wants us to emulate him and his life.

To be baptized into Jesus is to follow him. As the water pours over our little heads there is a fundamental change that happens. We begin our lives of forgiveness, of the promise of the presence of God's Spirit, united with Jesus in mission and in thought and claim, and we become part of the world wide Christian church, filled with the saints of today, the saints of yesterday and the saints of tomorrow. It's a big thing that happens to such a little person. But the act of baptism determines what will happen next.

For Jesus his baptism was the start of his public ministry. In the book of Mark there is no cute little story of the baby Jesus. There is no record of a teenager disobeying his parents. The

book of Mark begins with the Good News, and that Good News is Jesus' baptism, his presence among us, sent by God for us. For Jesus his baptism prepared him and told us what was going to happen next. He was going to spend his life following God's will and living out God's claim. And our baptisms are no different. God claims us, marks us, calls us, and sends us out to do his work in the world.

Today as we have our annual meeting I'd like to invite you to think about the ways in which you are living out your baptismal calling. Think about the ways we are forgiving, and loving and serving and walking alongside our neighbors. And I'd invite you to think about the ways that we can be doing that better, both individually and as a church family. Think about the ways we can be following Jesus and his claim over our lives not because we want to, but because we have the fire of the Holy Spirit inside of us. Because we are so very love and so very accepted and we want that for our neighbors, to know the peace and security that Jesus offers us.

As we celebrate Jesus baptism, I'd invite you to remember yours. Dig out those certificates and write the date on the calendar. Light a candle. Celebrate. And know that you are loved beyond measure and cared for today, tomorrow and always by the creator of the world. You are the apple of God's eye and there's nothing you can do about it. Thanks be to God. Amen.