

Once, Twice, Three Times a Baptism
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For those of us in the room who have been baptized, do you remember it? Some of you may remember it vividly, others may have been told because it happened at a very young age. I remember, but the real question for me is which time. The first, second, or third time I was baptized.

The first time I was seven years old. As far back as I can remember, I was intrigued by the small pool that resides just behind the choir loft of most Baptist churches. As a child, any exploration of the church included trying to find the secret passageway that led to the baptistery. In fact, it was one of the first things I did exploring this church. Alongside others, I was baptized on a Sunday night at the First Baptist Church of Dublin, GA. One after another, we would step down in the warm waters to meet Dr. Lamar Holley. Eagerly awaiting my turn, I remember talking with my friend Buck about what it would be like. What if water gets in my nose? What if I cough? Wait, what am I supposed to say when he asks a question? Do you think it will feel different when we come out of the water? The line kept moving, and Buck was up. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, dunk. Now my turn. I remember going under and coming back up and that was it. How did I feel? Soaking wet, excited, and grateful I'd remembered to wear shorts under the gown. I didn't feel different like I thought I might, but I did feel connected somehow. Now I had been baptized just like my mom, my dad, Buck, and most of the people in the church. I was a member, but it has taken my lifetime to better understand exactly what that means.

Today, Emma and Turner, you have been baptized like many of the people in this room, like many in your family, even those you may never have met. You have said you want to follow the ways of Jesus, you trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in your life and in the world around you, and you have been baptized marking your life with the

life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Over the last 2000 years, countless people share a baptism similar to yours. One such story we find in the book of Acts as Luke recounts one of the first baptisms. We are told Philip was on the run from the persecution of Saul, and he was traveling from town to town telling the Samaritans about Jesus. Yes, those Samaritans. Then an angel tells Philip to go down a wilderness road toward Gaza, and he meets an Ethiopian eunuch who was traveling to Jerusalem to worship. The Ethiopian is reading a passage in Isaiah, and a conversation ensues about the good news of Jesus. And then the Ethiopian asks one of the most profound questions "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" You see, there was plenty of reason not to baptize him, and both he and Philip were undoubtedly aware of this fact. While he was most likely a "God-fearer" who believed in Yahweh, based on his journey to Jerusalem and the fact that he was reading Isaiah, he was also a eunuch. Due to genital mutilation and the scars he carried, the eunuch had always faced social constructs which ruled him ineligible for full membership. I have to imagine that he carried a lot of shame, fear, and an overwhelming sense that he never fully belonged anywhere. One can only be told you are less than so many times before one begins to let such fears grow into beliefs. Sure, he held a high status as treasurer to the Queen of Ethiopia, but he was always marked by his difference. Probably often judged by it. In a culture driven by creating heirs, the eunuch was an outsider, ever marked as less than.

But as Philip spoke of Jesus, the eunuch must have heard a glimmer of hope that gave him confidence. What is to prevent me from being baptized? So Philip is faced with a choice, follow the rules of the day or follow this new way of Jesus. Exclusion or inclusion. We know what Philip chooses, but this is revolutionary. Baptism is a revolutionary symbol that reminds us that God's love is much more expansive than we imagine. The power structures that once defined the eunuch's entire existence have no power in this new kingdom. In the baptism ritual, the eunuch is being reminded, or quite possibly told for the first time, that he is a beloved child of God without any qualifications or stipulations.

When we rise from the baptismal waters, we are reminded of our own belovedness. Turner and Emma, your baptism today tells us that you believe you are beloved children of God, and if you ever forget it, remember this day. If you ever have anyone or any experience tell you otherwise, remember this day. For all of us who wade into the waters, we remember our belovedness in our baptism. Orthodox minister, Alexander Schmemmann says that at baptism, we say “I am a beloved child of God and I renounce anything or anyone who says otherwise.”¹

But there are certainly voices saying otherwise, aren't there? What are the things in our lives that say otherwise? Who are the people that say otherwise? These fears, these doubts, these voices keep us from embracing our belovedness.

This seems a fitting place to share the experience of my second baptism. Growing up in a small Alabama town that was always rumored to have the most churches per capita in America, my early understanding was that the primary reason for following the ways of God was to go to heaven and avoid hell. Here comes fear creeping in. And while my parents and my minister never expressed this, this is the message I received because it was so pervasive in the culture. It was so deeply engrained in the collective consciousness that it was nearly impossible not to hear.

On top of that, there was a profound emphasis on the right way to become a Christian. You had to pray a certain prayer (the ABC's), be baptized, and have unwavering faith. But the problem with this formulaic faith was that if there is a right formula, then there must be a wrong one as well. In my early teens, I began to worry. What if I didn't do it right? What if I didn't fully understand what I was doing when I was 7? Does that mean I'm not a Christian? And I could chalk this up to my own insecurities, except this is not just my story. It's a story I've heard time and again from others. I was spending so much of my spiritual energy worrying rather than following, driven by fear and a need for assurance. I was so worried, so consumed by adhering

¹ Schmemmann, 71.

to the rules that I was missing the opportunity to see God's love already working in and through me. Our fears can take many forms. We can fear we will not do things the right way, we are not worthy, we are less than, we have too much darkness, we are too selfish, we are unlovable.

Because baptism recognizes that there are 2 ways of life vying for our devotion. The first way is driven by fear, and the second by love. When the eunuch's head goes under the water, he is saying I no longer want to live with fear as my primary response. I no longer want to live as one who is figuratively or literally afraid of my difference. And as he rises fresh and anew, the eunuch symbolically says yes to the ways of love, to the kingdom of God. In the act of baptism, we tell others that we too want to choose love over fear.

Each day of our lives we are faced with the choice to follow the god of fear or the God of love, yet baptism reminds us that we have chosen to seek the God of love. We are embracing our belovedness just as God already has. And when we are brave enough to come face to face with the God of love, it allows us to offer this love to others. Not only do we realize our inherent worth and value, we begin to see it more keenly in others.

While my second baptism was initiated through fear, my third and as far as I can tell final baptism represents the hope that love brings. Three years ago, Katie and I were fortunate enough to go on a trip to Israel thanks to the generosity of her grandfather who said "You go to seminary, you get a trip to Israel." As Katie and I began to imagine this trip, we immediately got excited about the chance to get baptized in the Jordan River. As ministers, we could even baptize one another, marking our belovedness. How cool would that be? At this point, I am not thinking of rules or social constructs, but then of course I don't have to. No one has ever questioned my ability to be a minister. But looking back, I'm guessing that Katie was already thinking about whether there would be any pushback about her performing a baptism. You see, we happened to be going on this trip with a Southern Baptist church, and we are all too familiar with their rules regarding women in ministry. As the trip approaches, Katie

voices her concern that we will be unable to baptize each other. Fears began to creep in for both of us. What if the church won't let us do it? Will we do it anyway?

When the day arrives, we decide it will be best to tell the minister our desire and intention to baptize one another, and we both think that I will have more luck asking. As I spoke with the minister, I could feel his anxiety and uncertainty at our request. The power structures in place said that this was not a possibility. So even though he had known Katie her entire life, even though Katie was longtime friends with his daughter, even though Katie had been to seminary, he took pause. In fact, he was so unsure that he asked the pastor emeritus what he thought. In this moment, Katie faced her own eunuch experience as she posed the question "What is to prevent me from baptizing my spouse?" I waited, we waited, feeling powerless as they discussed. Ultimately, they decided to set down the rules and open up this possibility for Katie and I to honor each other's belovedness. As I ran back to tell Katie, I was struck by how profound this experience was for someone I love to be able to be fully herself. And as we walked from Jordan's banks into the living waters, we took turns symbolically burying a life of fear for a life of love. In this 3rd baptism, Katie and I were connected with a God that offers hope. Hope that the status quo doesn't have to be set in stone. Hope that new ways and new life are possible. Hope that old structures can be replaced with new ones, even if it is a slow process. And we had an audience of people who had probably never seen a woman perform a baptism. How might that have changed their view of who God is?

Because on that April afternoon in the Jordan River, Katie showed a kingdom where membership doesn't require a Y chromosome. It does not require a certain biology, orientation, background, ability, or disposition. The kingdom just invites you into the waters. It invites you to die to ways of fear, scarcity, and us vs. them to be reborn in ways of love, abundance and we are in this together. It invites any who will come to swim in the waters of the Divine imagination marked as a child of God.

As Paul says it, “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Paul’s words are a mere glimpse into what the kingdom of God is really like, a taste of how expansive God’s love really is. I think this is what God is inviting us to be a part of when we rise out of the waters, whether it takes once, twice, or three times a baptism. For each of our journeys are as unique and varied as we are. The question is what will we do with the unique journey that makes up our life? May we daily join in the flow of the divine in us and around us as we share our belovedness with all we encounter.

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