

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY 2011 YEAR

"A WANDERING BAPTIZER WAS I"

Church architecture changes from decade to decade, reflecting changes in theological emphases and the architect's liturgical preferences. For instance, wandering altars, which began as freestanding altars, then set against the east wall, then central in the transepts, and then back again. I served in one church that had wheels on the altar. (Probably a smart move.)

In early times baptismal fonts, or baptisteries, were originally placed outside the church in another building, sometimes attached, sometimes not. As time went on, they were moved inside but erected close to the entrance to symbolize the idea that it is only by baptism that we enter the church. Some Episcopal and Lutheran churches put a font by the entrance to remind themselves of this. This was actually recommended by Martin Luther, by the way.

Sacred Heart Church in Riverton, NJ, where I was baptized, is so huge that they have baptisms once a month, on the first Sunday, and the baptisteries are placed at both entrances, reflecting that theological emphasis. And in their bulletin is an announcement: "this morning, the first Sunday of the month, babies will be baptized at both ends."

Obviously, the theme of the two lessons today is baptism—ultimately, the baptism of Christ, but to be in Christ, the first step is baptism.

Say the word, "baptism," and what first comes to mind are babies. We all love babies. Baby anythings. There is something inherently adorable about babies.

Whether it is baby elephants, baby turtles, baby birds, puppies, kittens, even baby humans. Sweet little, adorable, vulnerable, helpless babies. Why? They perhaps symbolize a new beginning.

But what if someone 30 years old were going to be baptized today at this service? Would she wear a little white dress, and would there be a cake and party afterwards? Or would she in fact be a little embarrassed and want—if she were even courageous enough—to have it done privately with only the one obligatory witness.

Let me tell you a story about a young man named Karl. Not his real name, in fact I am not sure what it was, it was so long ago. Karl wanted to marry Suzanne and there was no problem there—she was an active communicant and he escorted her each Sunday. Karl had not been baptized and at the age of 28 there was no reason that he could see to go through what he saw as an embarrassing ceremony focused on him as the principal subject. Karl was a ruddy young construction worker. Nice enough, but he liked to play the tough guy.

(Our canons, by the way, only require one of the principals to be baptized and a witness.)

I leaned into Karl and told him there was nothing to be afraid of except commitment. (The “C” word of the X generation.) I told him I had been baptized at 21 and survived and that it would enable them to receive the sacrament and enhance the already beautiful ceremony of marriage.

The dare was accepted and we went into the church that night as Suzanne witnessed for the congregation. And when it was over Karl asked me if he could use my phone. Strange I thought but I said “sure,”

he dialed a number, and after a few seconds, someone picked up, and Karl said, with tears streaming down his face, "Mom, guess what, I just got baptized."

What Peter is talking about in this passage in Acts is that God has made clear that the Gentiles can be brought into the church of Jesus Christ by baptism, and he then baptized the whole household of Cornelius, Centurion men, women, and children.

There are Christian faiths that do not baptize babies because they say infants cannot witness for themselves. But that's exactly why we DO baptize them. Do we not feed them, caress them, love them, and give them the things they need to grow in health and philosophy? Baptism is not just a theological action, a doctrine, a dogma, it is also an identity.

Some adults are also not baptized because they think it is a denominational exercise. But Trinitarian baptism is universal and that places us into the Body of Christ. It identifies us as Christian. It gives us identity.

As Paul writes and Peter finally decides, with the help of God, it is the mark of a new beginning.

People often ask why Jesus demanded John baptize him. It was not a baptism for the repentance of sin, since Jesus was free of sin. Why then was it necessary?

Jesus own answer was, "Let it be so for now. For in this way we shall do all that God requires." That is, Jesus was ready to fulfill the requirements of His calling. His answer and his attitude are instructive, as are the promises we made in baptism and the promises made for us.

Baptism is a new beginning and as Christians it is constantly refreshed each time we review our creed. We are not part of a static religion because we are

constantly evolving. We look to the old only to support the new and if we didn't we would have died out long ago. We are the wise men still searching for the star. By virtue of our baptism WE are the embodiment of the Son of God.

The key to this transformation, John tells us, is in our believing. It is in accepting Jesus the Christ for who He is, that you and I can become what we were meant to be. Whoever is Lord of my life has power over it. We belong to that which we believe.

Amen