

“Precious, Honored, and Loved”

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Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Shall we gather at the river? Whether we meet at the baptismal font or on the banks of the River Jordan, we can draw from a deep well of life-giving symbolism. From the waters of creation, to the waters of our birth... from the water that Moses brought forth from a rock with the strike of his staff, to the waters that he parted so that the Hebrews could cross the Red Sea into their freedom... from the waters of the well where Sarah met Abraham, to the well that appeared to Abraham's slave concubine Hagar and her son when they were banished into the wilderness... from the waters where Jesus himself was baptized to the waters he promised to the Samaritan woman, living water that would never leave her thirsty, we know of the water as a primary symbol of holy presence and a life-saving substance in and of itself.

The sacrament of baptism itself draws on the Jewish practice of *mikvah*, a ritual cleansing bath that marked important life passages, bodily changes, and religious conversion. The mikvah has to have what is called living water, meaning the water which fills it has a constantly running source and outlet, so that the water is never stagnant. In order for the mikvah ritual to be complete, the one entering the bath must fully submerge themselves three times. With such a strong Orthodox community around us, there is a mikvah in Teaneck and one in Englewood. But it isn't only Orthodox women who use the mikvah today; for Susan Busch, a public health nurse in Boston who had gone to help with rescue in Banda Aceh following the Tsunami that devastated Indonesia in 2004, upon her return her rabbi recommended that she immerse herself in the mikveh so that she could connect with the healing power of water, to contrast with the devastation she had seen caused by water.<sup>1</sup>

Christian baptism, and the baptism John practiced before Jesus, probably drew from this Jewish ritual. However, there are some distinctions. One important one is that the one being baptized does not self-submerge. Instead, *another* person must sprinkle the water or dunk the initiate. It is a gift you receive; you cannot do it yourself. It is a grace that comes not because you have earned it, but because you are loved.

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<sup>1</sup> Anita Diamant, *Mayyim Hayyim* Promotional Video  
<http://anitadiamant.com/mayyim-hayyim-pages/mayyim-hayyim-video/>

Another difference from the Jewish mikvah is that the symbol of moving from death to life is much stronger. In the early church, people were literally held under water long enough that when they were finally brought up to the water's surface, that first breath really held the experience of salvation. Indeed, our baptism is supposed to replicate dying and rising with Christ.

In Christian baptism, the Holy Spirit has a significant role. In Jesus' baptism, Luke tells that "the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, like a dove." So in Jesus' experience, the Holy Spirit is not just some disembodied, invisible, woo-woo entity. The Holy Spirit somehow became physically present with Jesus. I like to think that it was and is through Jesus' body that we are able to see a union of the physical with the spiritual, rather than a separating of body from spirit. Baptism can remind us that we are mortal, earthly bodies... but that we are also born from above.

And then, we here something so loving and so personal. "You are my Son, the beloved. In you I am well pleased." Can you hear a voice like that echoing from your own baptism? "You are my Son. You are my Daughter. You are my Child, the beloved. In you I am well pleased."

If we can truly know that God offers to us such love and affirmation, it can have an orienting effect on our lives. Perhaps we would be freed of the insecurities that cause self-doubt or even worse, harmful arrogance. Perhaps we would not feel the need to diminish other people so that we could feel better about ourselves. Perhaps we would not try to hoard favor and privilege, but instead share it, recognizing that God has enough love, affirmation, and blessing to spill far beyond yourself. Betsy Voreacos told our Wednesday bible study group a story from when her father died. Betsy told us that she had always known growing up that *she* was her father's favorite. But when her dad died, her sister asked her, "How is it for you, knowing that *I* was always Daddy's favorite?" Betsy marvelled at how, through his presence with them, her dad made each of his daughters feel like she was his favorite. God's love is like that. When we are rooted in God's love, we feel like no one is loved more than us. But when we look around, we can also see that God loves each of God's children just as deeply. And so, we can be generous with that love, knowing that God's extravagant generosity does not take away from our belonging.

The Presbyterian Book of Common Worship encourages churches to exercise rituals to remember their baptisms. We do not re-baptize-- our teachings guide us that baptism is a one-time event that sustains us our whole lives, so whether you were sprinkled as an

infant in the Roman Catholic church or had a believers' baptism by full immersion in an Evangelical church, your baptism counts in our church; One Lord, one baptism.

When I served at the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, VA, I took part in a service of baptismal remembrance. We had throughout the large sanctuary glass bowls of water, and within them glass pebbles. We told the parishioners to come to the bowls, reach their hand into the water, and take a glass pebble. My minister colleagues and I met them at these water stations, telling them, "Remember your baptism and be glad." One 8-year old girl responded to me very matter-of-factly, "Well actually, I don't remember my baptism at all. I was 3 months old." I greeted an older woman with the same words, and as she drew the pebble out of the water, she promptly popped it into her mouth. "That's not candy!" I whispered to her. "What?" she looked up at me, confused. "Spit it out!" I yelled and held my hand beneath her chin until she dribbled the pebble into my palm.

Such is the danger of baptism; as much as it is a sign of our life, it is a sign of our death as well. When Christians die, we say that they have completed their baptism in death.<sup>2</sup> However, even as we face our own mortality, we have assurance of God's presence and care.

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, and you are mine," God said through the prophet in Isaiah. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

Notice in this passage that through the Prophet, God is not just speaking to *one* person. The prophecy is directed towards the community of believers. "He that created you, O Israel, he that formed you, O Jacob" the passage begins. Jacob, whom God later gifted with the name Israel-- which means "Struggles with God"-- is the name used in the Bible to speak of all the Hebrew people. Instead of referring to a specific person or specific place, it is a broad name for the children of God. So, instead of this being a passage that speaks to *you* as one person, it is a passage that speaks to *y'all*, as I learned to say growing up in the South.

This sacrament of baptism belongs to you. It is a deeply personal, intimate gift. It is an affirmation from a God who knows your name and says, You are my child, the beloved. With you I am well-pleased.

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<sup>2</sup> Presbyterian Mission Agency, "A Complete Baptism" by Charles Wiley III, December 26, 2016

The sacrament of baptism also belongs to *you plural*— or *y'all*. It is a promise that upholds a community, that recognizes us together as precious, honored and loved in God's eyes. It ties us to all those baptized, of every time and place. The water connects us to loved ones who have died and even to the earliest followers of Jesus in the bible. It connects us to the poor and oppressed, and binds our well-being to theirs. These waters may even bubble forth as we witness and affirm the ministry of elders and deacons who are saying "yes" today to a call of service.

You are, we are, precious, honored, and loved maybe you feel as if you have never heard God say that to you singularly. Vietnamese-American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen has a piece in the New York Times<sup>3</sup> that spoke of how difficult it can be for first generation Asian immigrant parents to say "I love you" to their children— and how difficult it is for their kids to say it back to their parents. He writes, "So many of our Asian parents have struggled, suffered and endured in ways that are completely beyond the imaginations of their children born or raised in North American comfort. This struggle and sacrifice was how Asian parents say 'I love you' without having to say it. And so many of us children are not expected to say it either, but instead are expected to express love through gratitude, which means obeying our parents and following their wishes for how we should live our lives." Not all though- he wrote "I became a writer despite, and perhaps because of, their resistance to the idea, my inarticulate desires pushing against their inarticulate sacrifice, all of it taking place before a backdrop of refugee life and racial reality." His article noted how powerful it was for Asians to see Sandra Oh, awarded at the Golden Globes for her performance in *Killing Eve*. She thanked her parents, giving them a traditional Korean bow, and then saying to them "I love you." From what I heard from many Asian friends there was a particular pride in that moment, not only for the honor of Oh's performance but also for this display of love and affection that so many Asian families know is there even when it is not articulated.

With or without words, Baptism is God's "I love you" to us. How will *you* respond to it? Remember your baptism, Christians, and be glad.

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<sup>3</sup> Viet Than Ngyuen, "Why We Struggle to Say I Love You" in *The New York Times*, 01/12/2012