

Worship 3: Baptism

January 25, 2009 – Baptism

If you look at your bulletin you will notice that the Liturgy for Baptism is placed in the Response to God section. When I was going to seminary in the 70's that is where we were taught the Sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism should go. And that is where the Sacraments probably fit best when you consider them from a human point of view. In the Scripture and sermon we hear God's love and grace proclaimed to us. And as a response to God's actions toward us we celebrate the Sacraments. In the most recent Reformed Church liturgy, the Sacraments are in the same place in the service, but the headings have been moved. The Sacraments are included as the last part of the Word of God, instead of the first part of the Response. This makes sense to me looking at the sacraments from God's point of view, instead of the human perspective. In the Sacraments, God is reaching out to human beings. In the bread and the cup, and in the water God is sharing his love and grace with us in a visible form. The love and Grace proclaimed in the word is also proclaimed in the Sacraments. Today we are going to look at Baptism and what it means from a human and from a divine perspective.

The part of the Baptismal service marked "Preparation" deals with the biblical and theological background of Baptism. The service lists several optional verses to be read at the start, but the two key verses for understanding Baptism are from the two Scripture passages we read a few minutes ago. Matthew 28 is the reason we baptize. We don't baptize just because ministers and elders and grandparents think it is a nice thing to do. We baptize because Jesus told Christians to baptize. "Go into all the world and baptize." Because of this command of Jesus, Baptism is something that almost all Christian denominations and associations do.

But Baptism is something that has tended to split the church and separate Christians from each other. The question some Christians would ask us is why do we baptize little children? The answer to that question begins with the passage from Genesis that we read. At this point in the Genesis story, it has been about 25 years since Abraham left Haran to follow God's call. God had promised to bless Abraham and to make Abraham a blessing to others. One of the ways God promised to show Abraham his love and grace was to give Abraham a son to inherit and to

carry on. Well, when the promise was first made, Abraham was 75 and childless, but he trusted God and followed God in faith. By chapter 17, Abraham has been following God for 25 years, wandering through the lands of Canaan and Egypt. God has renewed his promises to Abraham several times, and Abraham still follows in faith, but keeps trying to find other ways to fix this problem of not having any children. In Chapter 17 God once again renews his covenant with Abraham.

A covenant is an agreement, in human terms a legal agreement between two parties. Covenant agreements often include promises by both sides, as well as outlining responsibilities for both sides. God's promises to Abraham in this covenant include the promises of land and progeny. Maybe most importantly God promises to be the God of Abraham and the coming generations of Abraham's family. From Abraham's side of the covenant he is expected to accept the promises in faith, and to be obedient to God. Because this covenant was not written up by lawyers and written onto animal skins, Abraham couldn't accept God's gracious covenant, nor affirm his promises by signing his name on the dotted line. For this covenant agreement that God offers, Abraham was to show agreement and commitment by the ritual of circumcision. And this covenant sign was not limited to Abraham, but was to extend down the generations, to each male offspring of Abraham's line when they were 8 days old. Circumcision was to be the sign that this newborn child was part of God's covenant agreement, was part of God's special promises.

In the New Testament we hear about a new covenant between God and humans. This covenant comes to humans through Jesus Christ. In Christ, God promises us forgiveness, salvation, and everlasting life. On our side of the covenant, God is asking for acceptance in faith and obedience. In Acts 2, after Peter's sermon on the first Pentecost, people from the crowd ask how they can be saved. Peter replies, "repent and be baptized. This promise is to you and to your children." So, as Reformed people, we understand God's covenant as being with us, and with our children. If an adult becomes a Christian he or she is baptized as a sign that he or she is a part of God's covenant promises. And we believe that the children of Christian parents are also part of God's promises to Christians, just as they were in God's promises to Abraham. And

since baptism is now the sign that a person is part of the covenant people of God, we baptize these children as art of the covenant family of God.

These verses from Genesis, Matthew and Acts are read at the beginning of the baptismal liturgy to remind us of the promises of God that underlie Baptism. And then there are a couple of paragraphs of human words that remind us that Baptism is the sign and seal of this new covenant with God. The words also remind us that the nature of God's is eternal and unchangeable. The words also remind us that from the human side, as we accept the covenant in faith, we are also being called to obey our loving God.

The next part of Baptism, the Presentation, is simply what it sounds like. If the person being baptized is an adult, he or she is introduced. If it is a child, then the child as well as the parents are presented.

The profession of faith is the next part. Remember that the covenant God offers is accepted by faith. Again, an adult makes their own profession of faith before baptism. For a child, because the parents accept God's covenant by faith the child is part of God's promises, so at an infant baptism it is the parents who reaffirm their faith. Because the covenant acceptance also is a pledge of obedience, the parents make promises to raise the child within God's family, and to teach the ways of God to the child. Since the congregation is also part of God's family, they make promises of supporting the covenant and the family. And then all together profess their faith using the Apostles' Creed. In the first centuries of the church, most baptisms were done on Easter. Each year when new baptisms were done, it was a chance for everyone to reaffirm their faith and to remember and celebrate their place in God's covenant family. For the congregation baptism is a celebration of God's grace, for the child and for all of us.

Since Baptism is part of worship and as such is to focus on God, prayer is at the very center of baptism. After those present confess their faith, we offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God. God has blessed us with his covenant. God has blessed us through the working of the Holy Spirit. And so we give thanks.

Then there is the Baptismal covenant itself. God's grace and promises are extended to us and to our children. The water is not some magical potion that somehow changes the life of a child or of an adult. The water is a symbol of the work that the Holy Spirit has already begun in the life of the adult, or in the life of the child and the family. The water of Baptism is an outward sign of the inward working of God.

The Baptism part of the service closes with a Declaration and a prayer. On behalf of Christ the minister declares that the person baptized is now a visible member of the church and of God's family. Often forgotten in the declaration is the last couple of lines that lead us back to the idea of obedience as part of our covenant responsibilities. The person baptized is charged with confessing the faith of Christ, or we might say sharing their faith with other people. God's love and grace have been given to the person baptized. They are to respond by telling others about that love and grace.

God's promise was to be the God of Abraham throughout his life, and to be the God of the coming generations throughout their lives. The closing prayer celebrates this promise of God, and asks that it be realized in the lives of the family and in the life of the one baptized.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God has offered us his covenant of grace and reconciliation to us through faith in Jesus Christ. Let us now remember and celebrate our inclusion as participants of the covenant, as we celebrate with the Den Dulk family the Sacrament of Baptism.

Let me introduce briefly our next hymn. There is no witness in the gospels of Jesus baptizing anyone. But one of the gospel passages sometimes included as a baptism reading is the story of Jesus and the children. When others thought that Jesus was too busy and too important to deal with children, Jesus rebuked them. Jesus accepted the children and blessed them and pointed to them as examples of the kingdom of heaven. This next hymn is a reflection of that story from the gospels.

