

“I Am Baptized”

Mark 1:4-11

T.G.I.F. Thank God It's Friday. People have been offering this secular prayer of thanksgiving for years. The phrase has become so popular that we have a restaurant chain named after it. For those of us who have weekends off, Friday is when we're liberated from the chores of the work week. It's when we turn from business to pleasure, from work to relaxation.

These are the meanings and emotions we have traditionally attached to Fridays. Because we believe Fridays are happy days, we tend to remember Fridays as happy days. The meaning of a day shapes the memory of a day.

A bride might say her wedding day was the happiest day of her life. In fact, it was incredibly stressful, but the meaning of marriage turns it into a happy memory.

A man says the birth of his first child was a great joy. Truth is, it was absolute misery to watch his wife suffer through labor, but the meaning of childbirth makes the memory a positive one.

A teenager says that her rejection by a boyfriend was the most crushing blow of her life. In fact, she felt relieved and bounced back quickly. But the meaning of romance makes the breakup a painful memory.

An adult converts to Christianity says his baptism was wonderful. The reality is that it was wet, cold, and uncomfortable. But the meaning of the sacrament makes it deeply moving to him.

Meaning shapes memory. This insight can help us to better understand the significance of what happened to Jesus in the Jordan River and what happens to us in the waters of baptism.

“Meaning shapes memory” helps us to understand what happens to Alan Christopher Lull in the waters of baptism.

The Sunday after Epiphany is the day in the church year called “Baptism of the Lord,” and it

gives us an opportunity to remember this event and reflect on its meaning. It's a perfect example of how meaning shapes memory. What do we remember about the day of Jesus' baptism?

John the Baptizer appears in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People from the city of Jerusalem and all Judea flock to him, and are baptized in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. After years of living with a filthy build up of sin and unrighteousness, the people of the region are relieved to be washed clean and made right with God.

This feels very good to them. John's providing a much needed spiritual service, and we wouldn't be surprised to hear the people saying, T.G.F.J - Thank God for John. But then John switches gears and reveals he's not simply in the purification business. He proclaims, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me . . . I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

So here's John the Baptist, not so neat, not so clean, with a wild appearance, welcoming all sinners coming to him. Here is this wild looking guy that God chooses to baptize his son. What a gift to the sinners looking on! I can imagine them saying, "Hey, he's one of us. Look at what he's doing. Maybe there is hope for us."

When we look at what actually happened at the Jordan, we see a variety of emotions. There's gratitude for the gift of forgiveness. Surprise and shock at the sight of the baptizer's camel's hair clothing and diet of locust tree pods and wild honey. Maybe some confusion about the identity of the powerful one who's coming after John. So there's this whole jumble of emotions until Jesus comes on the scene.

Mark tells us that Jesus comes from Nazareth of Galilee and is baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as he is coming up out of the water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven says, "You are my son, the beloved; with you I am

well pleased.”

Meaning has a powerful effect on memory. This is the meaning of baptism: Jesus is God’s Son, the Beloved. The mix of feelings up to this point – gratitude for cleansing, surprise at the baptizer’s clothing and diet, confusion about the identity of the powerful one – all those feelings are suddenly pushed aside. In their place a new emotion arises: joy. When Jesus is baptized, we are filled with joy because God has revealed his son, announced his love, and we know that in our own baptism, we share the joy that God revealed in his son’s baptism. We know that in our own baptism God adopts us his children and loves us just as he loves his own son. We know that as Alan is baptized, we feel the joy of God making him his own. We celebrate with joy and thanksgiving.

The meaning of baptism is that God accepts Jesus as his son, and the joy we feel over this acceptance shapes our entire memory of baptism. Jesus is now, for us, the Word of God in human form. The Way, the Truth, and the Life. God from God, true God from true God. We know who Jesus is.

The very same is true for us as we remember, “I am baptized.” In this sacrament, we become part of the body of Christ – the universal community of Christians that’s nothing less than the flesh and blood physical presence of Jesus in the world today.

St. Paul asks, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” In this sacrament we become children of God no less loved and accepted than Jesus Christ himself.

This is the meaning of baptism: We become a part of the Body of Christ. Baptism enables us to die and rise with Christ. “It makes us dead to sin and alive to God,” Paul writes in Romans 6. It gives us new and everlasting life. It gives us a new identity as children of God. The meaning of

baptism shapes our memory forever.

We make a mistake though, if we believe baptism is the beginning of a lifetime of bliss. Think about what happens immediately after the baptism of Jesus. Mark tells us the Spirit immediately drives Jesus out into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan for 40 days. Then his Galilean ministry begins and Jesus comes face to face with a man with an unclean spirit, a woman with a fever, and a steady stream of people who are sick or possessed by demons. So there's no rest for the baptized.

Later, Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son who receives his half of the inheritance before his father dies and goes off to another land where he parties it away. Working for a pig farmer, not a good job for a Jewish boy, he realizes his father's servants are better off than he is. He chances going home, hoping his father will at least take him back in as a servant. His father thought he was dead and so welcomes him home and forgives his sin.

We are the baptized prodigal son or daughter who wanders away from our Father, who loses faith in our Father, who disobeys our Father, and yet our Father remains faithful to us, loving and forgiving us when we come wandering back to him pleading for forgiveness.

Baptism is not the beginning of a lifetime of bliss, but baptism is the beginning of an eternal relationship with our Father in which he teaches us to serve one another, to forgive one another, to love one another, to reconcile to one another just as he serves, loves, forgives, and reconciles himself to us as his beloved children.

Whenever we take a group of our youth on a summer servant camp trip or to the Redeemer Crisis Center to help serve a second Sunday of the month meal, we sometimes feel overwhelmed by the flood of the world's anguish and discover we are "raised up" and made new when reaching out to others. The breath of God fills us and we know we are all baptized children of God. Each of us is

reminded, "I am baptized."

If I say, "I was married," you will likely assume my wife has died or I am divorced. But if I say, "I am married," you will assume I have a wife and that on a certain date I was married and still am. Although it's true to say, "I was baptized," it is more accurate and necessary to say, "I Am Baptized."

I am baptized everyday when I am identified as a child of God who loves, serves, forgives, and reconciles as a child of God in His world. I am baptized everyday when I remember that no matter how bad I mess up, no matter who I hurt, my Father will forgive me and make me new everyday.

In the same way each of you can say, "I Am Baptized" everyday as a chosen child of God. Alan is now a baptized child of God today and everyday. He is precious in God's eyes and safe in his father's everlasting embrace.

With each new day we can say with faith and love, "I Am Baptized."

#455 - Crashing Waters at Creation