

After the Water has Dried

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Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22*

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I saw a movie once where the main character had a case of amnesia. He had been hit in the head and in addition to not remembering his distant past, his short term memory was gone as well. He couldn't remember things that happened even 15 minutes earlier.

He came up with the idea of tattooing messages on himself to remind him of important things and taking Polaroid pictures annotated with their meaning.

Tattooing oneself with reminders seems a rather extreme way to deal with amnesia, but I'm sure it must be very disconcerting not to be able to remember your past or who you really are.

You know, there is a type of amnesia different from what this character in the movie experienced. You may not have ever heard of this type of amnesia. It's called ***spiritual amnesia***.

Spiritual amnesia is forgetting the identity given to us by our Creator. We forget what God has done for us and what God has promised for us. We also many times forget what we are called to be and to do as disciples.

But, God, in all God's goodness has given the church a gift to help us remember—to counteract this spiritual amnesia from which we suffer from at times. This gift is much less painful than getting a tattoo to remind us of what we have forgotten. However, we ***are*** marked for life, tattooed, if you will, forever when we receive this gift. God's gift to us is Baptism.

Baptism is one of the two sacraments of the Presbyterian Church. It is a sacred ritual administered with simple everyday tap water. There is no magical power in the water we use to baptize. Water from the Jordan River, where we read Jesus was baptized is no more special than the water that is used in this baptismal font in front of us today. God chooses everyday elements found in nature, such as water, grains for bread, and grapes for wine to symbolize deeply spiritual events. Water is the major symbol used in the Bible for baptism.

Water is such a significant symbol of the Christian faith; we can bracket the life, ministry, and death of Jesus with water. Jesus began his life in the waters of his mother's womb. Jesus was baptized in the waters of the Jordan River. Jesus called his disciples around the Sea of Galilee, and when Jesus was on the cross, "the centurion's spear pierced his side emptying him of the very substances of life—water and blood."

The water used in Baptism is symbolic of all these things and more. It is also symbolic of death, rebirth, and the washing away of sin, so that we may be cleansed and put on the fresh garment of Jesus Christ.

In God's gift of Baptism, a covenant is established between God, the person baptized, and the church. Through covenant, a relationship is established between one who makes a promise and those to whom the promise is given. Our baptismal covenant is one of the ways in which God reminds us of **our** identities—our identity as children in God's Realm.

Unfortunately, covenants are not always respected. The prophets of Israel, such as Amos, and others, envisioned a fresh expression of God's grace and of creation's goodness for their generation when *their* society and the world were in such chaos, and their generation was failing to honor God's covenant. They envisioned a new covenant accompanied by the sprinkling of cleansing water. This vision of a new covenant was given to us in Jesus Christ. This vision of creation's goodness and God's grace is given to us—as a precious gift—in our baptism.

Regrettably, many times we are no different from the society during Amos' time. Unlike God, who is faithful to all covenant promises, we in our humanness do not always hold up our end of the covenant.

Later in this hour of worship, we will reaffirm the covenant we entered into in our Baptism. I want to be clear, that "Baptism is only received once." **God's faithfulness needs no renewal.** There are times, however, when **we** need to renew **our** end of the covenant made in our Baptism. Human faithfulness to God needs repeated renewal."

Back in 1997, several years before I even had a notion I was being called to ordained ministry, I first renewed my baptismal covenant at my home church in Mesquite. I had been experiencing a "spiritual reawakening" in my life, and desired some way in which to recommit myself to God. I felt like I needed a spiritual jolt, a boost, if you will.

I was baptized as an infant, as I'm sure many of you were. I had also experienced the baptism of my three children, and was deeply touched by the promises I, along with the congregation made in their baptisms. I wanted to experience Baptism again as an adult, with an adult understanding of what Baptism meant. I wanted that power of the Holy Spirit, descending like a dove to alight on **me** and renew my life with God. I wanted to be re-baptized.

What I didn't understand was what I quoted earlier from the Book of Order; "**God's faithfulness needs no renewal.**" God's sign and seal of the covenant—of my citizenship in God's Kingdom were tattooed on my heart and in my soul when I was baptized as an infant. It was **I** that needed to renew **my** promises to God—not God that need to hold up God's end of the covenant.

My pastor, Dr. Tom Wilbanks, in his infinite wisdom, understood this fact, better than I did. He suggested a *renewal* of my baptismal covenant during the regular hour of worship.

This was something brand new to our congregation, and instead of a formal congregational reaffirmation of baptismal vows for the entire congregation to participate in, like we are going to do today, I was the only one that Sunday morning renewing my baptismal covenant.

Wait a minute—let me take that statement back, because that is not correct. I **was** the only one standing in front of the congregation making my own public profession of faith, and restating my promises made for me as an infant in the baptismal covenant. However, each time a congregation participates in a Baptism, of an infant, or an adult, it is an occasion for the whole community to renew their own baptismal vows. It is an occasion for remembering that our life in Christ is a continuous experience and that our commitment is to be renewed daily.

You see, Baptism is a process. It is more than just a specific moment in time. When you are sprinkled, or dunked, or dipped into the water, that moment in time **initiates/begins** the relational covenant with God. However, **the process of living our baptismal identity requires a lifetime, regardless of the age of initiation.**

I recently attended a funeral service at a Catholic Church. The priest was talking about baptism, and noted why baptisms in the Catholic Church occur in the narthex, or at the entryway into the sanctuary. We place our font front and center in our sanctuary, because of the importance of baptism in our faith and our daily life, but this priest said that theirs was at the entry to the sanctuary, because it signifies an *entry* into the church. It is only a beginning of the Christian faith, and a process to be lived out daily.

When we accept the gift of Baptism and our identity as citizens in God's Kingdom, we are called to respond to that precious gift with the response of faithfulness and discipleship. You see, what matters most is not really the exact moment of baptism, but how we live our life **after** baptismal water on our heads has dried.

In Baptism, God embraced us with the love of Christ and told us, you **are my beloved children.** We grow into that promise, and all God's promises everyday, and keep growing until we can claim those promises for ourselves.

Our lives matter to God. We have been baptized, cleansed by the water, and now God waits. God waits to see how we shall speak, how we will live, after the water has dried.

Amen.