Exodus 40:29-32, John 1:29-34

“What is baptism?”

This year marks the year that I have spent an equal amount of time as a pastor here in the US as I have as a missionary overseas, 9 years at both. But when you are a missionary you have to be creative and come up solutions to issues that arise that you have never faced in your life. I remember my first baptism in Moscow, we were baptizing 5 adults and I realized that the church had no baptismal font. I looked around the parsonage for the most font appropriate bowl. It was this deep rich blue and it served its purpose wonderfully.

I was pretty happy with myself as we were driving home from church when Stacy said: “The girls have a question for you.” I was thinking that it was going to be some theological question that I could use my Princeton Seminary pedigree to answer. They asked me: “Daddy, why did you use our popcorn bowl to baptize those people in church?” I had no response, but Presbyterians do it differently.

Today we are going to look at this topic of baptism and since my daughters didn’t let me use my Princeton knowledge, you all aren’t so lucky. We find ourselves in a place that is steeped in Anabaptist culture with many coming from Amish and Mennonite backgrounds. In regards to baptism Presbyterians believe differently than these Christians believe. We encourage infant baptism because we believe that God chose you before you had a chance to choose God. As a result our baptism reflects the fact that God is the one who does the choosing, not individuals. Let me repeat that, you did not choose God, God chose you and you are merely responding to God’s choosing.

Today is going to be a very different type of sermon. It will be a very traditional 3 point sermon where we will see what John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, has to say about baptism. He states that baptism points to: our forgiveness, our active participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection, and lastly innumerable blessings. But lest we think Calvin’s voice would in any measure approach the authority of Scriptures, which it doesn’t we will see what our Scripture today has to say about baptism and use that as a jumping off point.

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Let’s get right into what we believe about baptism. In our Exodus reading you hear about how Moses and Aaron and their children had to wash before coming into the presence of God in the tabernacle. Baptism, before Jesus, before the John the Baptist of today’s Scripture was simply a rite of purification. Remember when Jesus turned the water into wine? Do you remember what that water was for? Look at chapter 2:6: “Now standing there were six stone jars for the Jewish rites of purification.” Every jew who wanted to go to the synagogue or to the temple had to be ritually clean. That is what baptism was back then.

I remember when we went to the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, the site where East meets West, some call it Constantinople but I call it Istanbul, not Constantinople. Any was struck by the hundreds and hundreds of shoes that were lined up outside of the mosque, and the washing region where the men were lined up washing their feet and their hands and arms. Just like what this Scripture states in order to purify themselves, to wash themselves before going into the holy Mosque. They have a watering hole outside of their place of worship to make sure that people don’t come as they are when they go to worship Almighty God.

This cleansing ritual had nothing to do with the covenant that the people had with God. What was the sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham? Who knows? Circumcision. Here’s a trick question. Who can be a child of God and sealed with this sign of the covenant? Only men, that’s right. But Ezekiel tells us that a day would come when the covenant will be written on our hearts. Paul says very clearly in Colossians 2:11-12 that in Jesus Christ baptism now takes the place of circumcision in regards to the sign and seal of God’s promises and covenant in Jesus Christ.

In fact, John the Baptist is the one, and these verses are central to our whole understanding of this concept, that the baptism of old is now not just a symbol of cleanliness but it is the visible sign of God’s covenant with us. It is a big deal. Baptism now has meaning for all of us and in our John reading we are going to see that meaning.

As we stated earlier, John Calvin tells us that baptism speaks very directly to our forgiveness. If you look at vs. 29 and then later in our Scripture in vs. 36 you see a phrase used that describes Jesus. Lamb of God. In vs. 29 John takes a step farther and says the Lamb or God who takes away the sin of the world. Baptism principally and primarily points to Jesus’ sacrifice, ultimate sacrifice that led to the forgiveness of each of us. Without the shedding of blood and the sacrificial lamb the people could not be forgiven of their sin by the priest. Without the sacrifice of Jesus the lamb not a single person in all of humanity could be washed clean. Jesus’ blood allows all of humanity to be washed clean. The washing in baptism points to the forgiveness by the shedding of Jesus’ blood.

Secondly, when the water surrounds you or is poured over your head it represents the fact that you go down to the same death that Jesus died to and then came up alive and resurrected in new life. That is an active participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection. When we are baptized we are given a new life, a new chance. We are initiated and welcomed into the Christian family. That initiation gives us a new last name that we can never change.

Think about it. When you are baptized you get a new last name and it is Christian. Now some of our first names may be different like Presbyterian Christians, that is our first and last name. There are also Methodist Christians, Lutheran Christians, Mennonite Christians and so on. But we are all in the same family and you don’t have to be rebaptized if you relocate and move to another family with the same last name, but they all have different first names. If they make you get baptized again then they are basically saying that all this time that you were a Christian in another church you were not really celebrating and taking advantage of the fact that you have come out of the water of baptism no longer dead, but rather dead to your sin and resurrected to a new life in Jesus Christ. That is what each of us should be taking advantage of these days.

Now there are other families with different last names in the world: There are those whose last name is Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Mormon, Jehovah Witness, but they are not part of the Christian family nor do they want to be. They don’t baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit nor do they want to. In our baptism we agree that we are completely committed to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and we live out our family name. We aren’t spectators but rather participants in his life, death, and resurrection.

John says as much testifying in vs. 30 that the Son was present at the beginning of time and in vs. 34 by calling him the Son of God.

Finally, in baptism we receive blessings from God that would not otherwise come upon us without baptism. The most important blessing that we could ever receive comes from baptism which is found in vs. 32-33. What is it? Read those verses again and see if you can identify the gift. That’s right, the Holy Spirit. When we are baptized we receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit who guides and directs our everyday life.

Baptism is really not that complicated. When we pour water over a baby I hold them close and say child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and grafted into Christ forever. I say forever, you can’t change your last name no matter how far you run, your Father is going to come looking for you because he claimed you as His own in baptism.

In baptism we give thanks over forgiveness, we give thanks that we are active participants in the death and resurrection of our Savior, we give thanks for the blessing of the Holy Spirit who claims us forever.

Now as you live out your life as baptized Christians know that God has chosen you long before you could choose God. That is good news. And know that your baptism is good for the rest of your life. If you backslide you don’t have to do it again. Just go back, humbly to your father and he will always take you back. Amen.