

First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
Lenten Luncheon February 23, 2010
Reflections led by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Welcome

Prayer

Gracious God, you have brought us again to the beginning of this Lenten season and provided us with an opportunity to share this fellowship together and to be fed in body, mind and spirit as we share in these luncheons together. Through our time together may we continue to draw on the strength with which you want to provide us from yourself, from your word and from one another as we continue our journeys as the followers of Jesus Christ your Son, for it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

Opening Hymn No. 33 “What A Friend We Have in Jesus”
Stanzas 1 and 3

Unison Prayer:

Gracious God, we gather here today to enjoy your presence and to learn from you and from one another. Help us to enter into this season of Lent with thoughtfulness and openness, trusting that you are our Guide and Teacher. Give us ears to hear your word, eyes to see your face, and courage to follow the path you set before us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Today I would like to ask you to think about the question on the sheet --

What Does Your Baptism Mean To You?

As you think about that question I would like to invite you to think about the related questions on the sheet. For those of you who have been Elder Partners with any of the young people in this congregation the questions may well look very familiar because they are ones that Rachel and I have asked you to be ready to answer and to share with the young person with whom you may be working. I have put those questions there for us today for two reasons. The first is that when Rachel and I were leading a Confirmation Class in our last congregation at the Little Chapel on the Boardwalk at Wrightsville Beach we had a gentleman who was serving as one of our Elder Partners who was in his late 50s at the time. He said, "I do not know the answer to many of these questions. I think I had better ask my parents some of these questions while I have the opportunity and they are still alive and able to answer them." Some of you may find yourself in the same position so you may want to ask these questions of your parents or your elder siblings who may have been present at your baptism. You may also want to review them to share this information with children or grandchildren to inform them about their baptisms.

The second reason that I pose these questions today is that the Season of Lent traditionally has been associated with Baptism. Historically in the Early Church Lent became the final few weeks of preparation through prayer and fasting for those who would make their Professions and of Faith and be baptized at the Easter Vigil. For some of these people this time may be the culmination of two years of preparation. Gradually those who had been baptized previously started to say that we will share in this time of prayer and fasting with you as we reflect on what our own baptisms mean

to us. Even if they may not do much fasting many people still today use this Season of Lent to reflect on the meaning of their baptisms. This is the reason that each Sunday during Lent as we share in our Assurance of Pardon we will be reminded of our baptisms.

Before we reflect further I would like to ask for a show of hands about some of the first questions on the sheet.

In answer to the question, “Where were you baptized?”

Please raise your hand if you were baptized in this church.

Please keep your hand up, and now answer question number three, who was the pastor who baptized you?

Then for others, “Where were you baptized?”

Please raise your hands for a: Presbyterian Church; Methodist Church; Lutheran Church; Catholic Church; Episcopal Church; Baptist Church; Other...

The diversity here is probably reflective of the diversity of background found in most mainline congregations today. In the Presbyterian Church, of course, we affirm and accept the Sacrament of Baptism that has taken place in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in any Christian Church, and do not require that people have to be re-baptized in the Presbyterian way in order to become members of the Presbyterian Church.

I would invite you to take the sheets with you and to review the other questions, and maybe share them with other members of your family.

2. When were you baptized – as an infant or as an adult?
3. Who was the pastor who baptized you?
4. Who was present for your baptism?
5. What clothing did you wear for your baptism?

6. Did anything funny happen at your baptism?
7. Did anything sad occur at your baptism?
8. Why did your parents present you for baptism, if they did?
9. What does it mean to you today that you have been baptized?
10. What do you remember most about a celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism that you have witnessed?

As Presbyterians, and indeed, for most Christians there are two main reasons why we are baptized. The first is that Jesus as some of his last words gave what we often call the Great Commission in which he said to his disciples right before his ascension, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

The second reason many would give of why they have been baptized is that Jesus himself was baptized. I would invite you to join with me in reading about his baptism as recorded in Luke's Gospel using the words on the sheet.

Leader: Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven,

Unison: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Baptism for Jesus marks the beginning of his ministry. He comes from the obscurity of life in the town of Nazareth to be baptized by John and it is from this point on in his life that all four Gospels begin to record his ministry. The word that he hears at his baptism is the clear affirmation that what he is doing is indeed God's will, and pleasing to God the Father.

What is interesting is to see what happens next according to Matthew, Mark and Luke. I would invite you now to read these words with me as they are found on the sheet:

Leader:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him,

Men:

"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Leader: Jesus answered him,

Women:

'It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.' "

Leader:

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him,

Men:

"To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

Leader: Jesus answered him,

Women:

'It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' "

Leader:

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him,

Men:

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "

Leader: Jesus answered him,

Women:

'It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

Leader:

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

There are certainly many things that we could say about these temptation stories and I am sure that you have heard many sermons on them over the years, as many of you did here in this congregation this past Sunday. The one thing I would like to highlight today, though, is the very obvious connection that is seen between his baptism and his temptations. At his baptism Jesus hears, **"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."** What according to Luke is the next thing Jesus hears? **"If you are the Son of God."** Twice in the temptations according to Luke the devil makes such a statement. Clearly then the temptations become a time of testing and questioning for Jesus as to how he is going to

live out his identity as the Son of God, which has been affirmed to him in his baptism.

When we think about the experience of Jesus following his baptism we see that as we reflect on our baptisms our experience in so many ways is the same. True most of us may not have heard any voices from heaven speaking directly to us when we were baptized but our baptisms at whatever age are an affirmation to us that in God's sight we are God's beloved children. For us, as for Jesus, the question that arises from our baptism is how are we going to live out our true identity as the children of God, as people marked and claimed by God's love and forgiveness in our baptism. One of the hymns that we often sing when we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism here in this congregation has the line, "live as one who bears Christ's name." (Hymn No. 498: "Children of Blessing, Child of Promise.")

Lent is a time for us to pause and to look at what our baptism means to us, and most of all, what it means to us to be the followers of Jesus Christ, and men and women who bear Christ's name. This is our true identity as the children of God, but the question comes to us as it came to Jesus how are we living and acting so that other people will know who we are as the children of God and the followers of Jesus Christ. In these days we hear many warnings to protect ourselves against identity theft. I wonder, though, how often you have heard a warning not that someone might steal your identity but that you might choose to lose your true identity by failing to live up to your baptism, to being one who bears Christ's name. Lent is a time for us to reflect on how we are living up to our true identity.

In a study for Lent prepared this year by Michael A. Lindvell, the pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City he says, "We live in a world in which our sharpest temptation is often much the same as the

sum of the temptations Jesus faced. Just as he was tempted to forget who he was and be a success, we are tempted to be a success in the eyes of the world but in the process to forget whom we are called to be. Don't misunderstand me; success can be a very good thing. Indeed, sometimes being whom you are called to be may well lead to success in the eyes of the world. But the harder truth is this: "success" in the eyes of the world and "whom you are meant to be" are not always the same thing. In fact, sometimes they are at sharp odds with each other. The real temptation Jesus faced, the real temptation we face in a hundred subtle ways, is the temptation to be a success in the eyes of the world but at the cost of integrity. We are tempted to succeed at the price of our families, to succeed magnificently but to lose our happiness, to succeed grandly and pay for it with our souls. Had Jesus yielded to his temptation he might have been a smashing first century success—plenty of bread, famous worker of miracles, major Judean politician, or maybe just a locally renowned rabbi-carpenter, husband, and father. All of these are credible manifestations of success, but Jesus was meant to be more. And you and I are finally meant for even more than success in the eyes of the world."

He goes on to suggest:

"When we wear the name 'Christian,' we do no less than assume our core identity. To be a Christian is not one loyalty among many. To be a Christian is not one of several equally important identities. Faith cannot be just one personal interest among several hobbies. Church is not just another of the various associations to which you might belong. The teachings of Jesus are not just one possible source of guidance among many we might select, cafeteria style. At the end of the day, you just can't dabble with Jesus. You might be a mom or a music teacher who is a Christian. You might be a Christian investment banker. You can be a

follower of Jesus Christ who is also a lawyer. In these dual roles, however, it is your faith that guides your music teaching, your mothering, and your banking, not the other way around.

The eternal temptation is always to forget who you are and let the world define you, to forget who you are and let your job define you, to forget who you are and let money define you, to forget who you are and let clothes, or smarts, or looks, or addiction, or sex define you.”

As you think about what your baptism means to you I want to conclude with the story that Michael Lindvall shares out of his own family. Maybe it is also a tradition in your own family, or one that you may want to start, or maybe just some words that you may want to say to yourself at the start of each day and many times during the day.

He writes, “Over the years, whenever one of our children has gone out the door, whether for an evening or off to college, I have always whispered the same words in his or her ear during the farewell hug. I’ve been saying these words for so long that they’ve become a standing family joke. I said them when our oldest moved to New York after college graduation. I said them to my son when he got on the plane to go on a mission trip to Israel. I said them to our youngest when she flew off for her freshman year. I give them the farewell hug and say to them, “Remember who you are.”

As we journey through Lent this year may we not just think about what our baptism means to us, but may we all be able to come to appreciate and to remember what our baptism says to each of us about who we are.

Join me now and look at someone seated near you and say, “Remember who you are.”

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Closing Prayer

Holy God, we thank you for your word to us. Remind us daily of who we are and whose we are.

Now in the silence, O God, I would pray that you will strengthen the person on my right (Time of silence).

Now in the silence, O God, I would pray that you will strengthen the person on my left (Time of silence)

Help us to trust that you go with us wherever we go, whether we are wandering in the wilderness or safe at home. These things we pray through Jesus Christ, who knows all of our temptations but has shown us a better way to live. Amen.

Closing Hymn No. 16

“He Lives”

Stanzas 1 and 3