

In Christ Alone, Pt. 3
Baptized into Christ
Galatians 4: 4-7; 3: 26-27

**First Presbyterian Church
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The idea of union with Christ is profoundly important. When I am spiritually joined to Jesus something wonderful happens. The saving events of Jesus' life become the saving events of *my* life. The power of his sinless life, atoning death and glorious resurrection start working spiritually inside of me. The saving events of Jesus become the saving events of my life.

On the one hand, it seems so simple. I am in Jesus. Jesus is in me. What's mine is his. What's his is mine. But as you think about it, you realize these waters suddenly get very deep. It all seems so mystical and mysterious. The New Testament uses lots of different word pictures to describe this wonderful reality of being in Christ. One place, Paul says it's like a wild olive branch being grafted into an established olive tree. Suddenly the branch lives from a deeper, richer source. Another place, he says union with Christ is like a marriage, where the bride and groom become one flesh. Other places, like today's Galatians passage, he speaks of being adopted into the family of God, not just legally, but really becoming part of the family.

But above all, the New Testament uses the picture of baptism as the premier sign of being joined to Jesus. Way too often, I get hung up on trying to figure out and explain baptism. Is it for infants or only for those who make a faith decision? Does it matter whether you sprinkle or immerse? Does the water do something magic to us? Does baptism itself save us? Those are all important questions and I'm always happy to talk about those aspects. But those questions can also deflect us from experiencing the power of the picture. What could happen if we put the technical questions aside for a few minutes and just let the picture fill us up?

My mother liked to use the phrase "mad as a hornet." Growing up I knew about bees—we had hives in our drain spouts. But I only got stung if I messed with them. I knew about wasps: they leave you alone unless you get right on the nest. But I had never experienced hornets until one summer in the North Carolina mountains.



On this hot July day, our elder son Micah and I were hiking in the woods. We'd found a path we hadn't been on before that wound above and around a waterfall we loved. As we explored, we stepped on a hole in which hornets resided. They came out like jet fighters scrambled for an air battle. Seemingly out of nowhere they were biting us everywhere. Bites like little hot burns on legs and arms. We ran. They followed. We ran more; they followed faster. I had to think on the fly. Where do you go in the woods to protect your four year old? In my panic, I could only think of one thing. Two hundred yards down a couple of paths was the mountain pool that the waterfall dumped into. It was freezing cold. Heart stopping cold. But deep enough for us to submerge. "Quick! Into the water!" Without hesitation Micah and I leapt into the pool. Freezing never felt so good. The pain of the bites got taken away. We were so sweaty from the run that the cold was glorious. And the hornets didn't want to be over open water. Our heads came up dripping wet. We started laughing at our panic and our escape. We were saved by the plunge into waters that took away all the sting. You can see the pool and the falls behind us.



It was the same setting for Micah and Rachel's Christmas card this year. The chilling, healing, rescuing pool. That's a picture of union with Christ. The hornets of life chase us and bite us. We feel the sting of evil without and sin within. We feel the panic of new attacks all the time. We can't survive this life on our own. We leap into Christ. The water is so cold it could stop our hearts. But it also takes away the sin and makes everything new. The saving events of Jesus become the saving events of our life.



Here's another picture. One of the first places dedicated particularly to baptizing new believers is in Rome, next to the great Lateran Basilica of St. John. Since the fourth century it has been not only preserved but enhanced through the ages. Converts would go down into the marble pool for baptism. The round pool is bordered by 8 marble columns. The eight beams, or architraves, across the columns each have two lines of writing etched into them. These are the words of Leo the Great about baptism. They give us a picture of union with Christ:

Here is born a people of noble race, destined for Heaven..
Whom the Spirit brings forth in the waters he has made fruitful.

This is the spring of life that waters the whole world,
Taking its origin from the Wounds of Christ.

Sinner, to be purified, go down into the holy water.
It receives the unregenerate and brings him forth a new man.

If you wish to be made innocent, be cleansed in this pool,
whether you are weighed down by ancestral sin or your own.

Let neither the number nor the kind of their sins terrify anyone;
Once reborn in this water, you will be holy.

There is no barrier between those who are reborn and made one
by the one font, the one Spirit, and the one faith.

When I visited, I wished the pool had been filled. I might just have had to take a dip in that sacred bath. The ancient font is a picture of union with Christ. Spiritually speaking, that fountain fills up with the water and blood that flowed from Jesus' side when the Roman soldier speared him at his death. You go under the water dirty with inherited sin and your own stupid choices, the things done to you and the things you did. You get joined to the death of Jesus as your old life dies. His death took away the sins of the world. He rose in a resurrected body. The saving events of his life become the saving events of your life. So you come up from the pool a new creation. And you find a oneness with all who are united to Christ with you. It's a picture of transformation from being immersed into Jesus.



My friend and colleague Robert Austell recently sent me a sermon he did on baptism. He recalled the days when we loved *Star Trek: the Next Generation*. (To me, it's still the best of all the Star Trek adaptations!). Robert recalled the classic episode in which the crew of the Enterprise was meeting another species for the first time, hoping to establish friendly and diplomatic relations with them. But they encountered a basic failure of communication. Captain Picard launched into an opening diplomatic speech full of technical jargon and carefully chosen phrases. The other species replied by only mentioning names and places, speaking in short animated phrases like "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra." Both groups looked perplexed at one another. Then, the captain of the other group said something to his first officer, who seemed to protest, but the order was given: the other captain

pulled out two knives and the next thing you knew he and Captain Picard disappeared, beamed off their ships to the planet below.



What unfolded was fascinating. We come to realize that the alien species communicated by metaphor. The names and places they spoke called forth for them a historic event between two people; whatever happened at that *past* event was meant to speak to the *present* situation. We come to realize that “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra” was a famous encounter between two strangers who faced hardship together (at a place called Tanagra) and then became friends and allies. The alien species was also interested in a diplomatic relationship, but the only way they knew to say so was unintelligible to Captain Picard and the other humans.

So what the alien captain did was to transport the two strangers to a place where they would face a common foe, a terrible beast on the planet below. The knives weren't to be used against Picard, but shared with him as they defended each other together. They would create a new story which both groups would be able to refer to as the start of their friendship. In the end, what actually happened was that the alien captain lost his life defending Picard, who was able to explain this to the alien crew using his discovery of their communication patterns. “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra” became “Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel.”

Robert recalled how this story gave him a picture of union with Christ through baptism. The waters of baptism dramatize the specific and eternal story of God's presence and mercy through Jesus Christ. Jesus' own baptism was a picture of his whole saving life, death and resurrection. The sinless Jesus went under the waters like any other sinner: he got cleansed for us. Then he came up from the waters as the dove of the Holy Spirit descended and the Father declared, “This is my beloved Son! In him I am well pleased.” His baptism was a picture of his taking the guilt of our sins to death on the cross. His baptism was a picture of Christ's rising from the dead when the Father declared him “Not Guilty.” Every baptism is a participation in the one baptism that matters: Jesus getting baptized in water and then in blood on our behalf.

So Robert concluded with his own astonishment. He wrote, “Every time I see the waters of baptism, I see a picture of God's story with me: Jesus and Robert, dripping with water. It is my specific story that rests in the rich drama of

God's loving pursuit of humanity since before the foundations of the world. It is my specific story of covenants and family and church, of identity and promise, of faith and acceptance, of calling and purpose all taken up into the One story. We tend to think of rituals as mindless repetition, but what they are meant to be are re-enactments of powerful stories. Baptism is a public sacrament enacted to tell the ancient, present, and eternal story of what God has done in Jesus Christ. It doesn't just communicate information; it tells a story. And it's not just a story to entertain, but communicates a reality based in history and relationship." ¹

Jesus and Robert dripping with water. Jesus and Robert down under the waters to die to sin. Jesus and Robert rising together in new life. The saving events of Jesus' life are the saving events of my life. Jesus and Robert dripping with water.

The Bible gives lots of pictures of our union with Jesus. Adoption into his family. Branches grafted into the tree. A bride joined to her husband. Members of one body joined to our Head. But above all, the Bible gives a picture we get to see enacted. Baptism. Every baptism is a picture of union with Jesus. What matters most is that every baptism we do is first of all a picture of Jesus' own baptism, his saving dying and rising for us. It's foremost about what Jesus did, not what we do. Then, and only then, every baptism is a picture of joining someone to the saving story of Jesus. It's a touchable, feel-able picture. You and Jesus dripping with water. The saving events of Jesus life are the saving events of your life, because you have been immersed into the clear, cool crystal pool of Christ.



Next week, we will have four baptisms at our church. It's so important to know that each one of us is a participant in each one of those baptisms. Jesus and baby Breard dripping with water means Jesus and *you* dripping with the water of the saving events that he has joined you to. Jesus and baby Price dripping with water next week becomes *my* memory of being baptized. I can't recall the actual event of my baptism. But I will recall it as a present experience when I see baby Klingman wetted with the waters that flow from Christ's side. You may feel a long way from the faith you had when you got baptized as an adolescent. But next week when Ben Phillips is baptized, that is your baptism as well. I answer the questions of faith all over again. I renew my joining to Jesus. I recall the one baptism that matters, Christ dying and rising for us. Jesus and each

one of us, dripping with water. You are in Christ. Use all your imagination to keep leaping into that healing pool!

Let's close with this prayer that will be in our books this week:

Filthy with regret, I made my way to you,
Head bowed with the weight of shame,
Encrusted with habits I could not break,
Raw from all the ways I tried to wash myself,
I heard there was a cleansing pool.
On its edge, I hesitated.
I knew I was leaving behind
Many things I thought I loved.
They had hurt me again and again,
And caused me to hurt others,
But even the pain bound me to them.
Could I live without these ways?
Behind me the rubble, before me the water.
I felt your wind blow crisp around me,
I let it lift me, and then I leapt.
The water was icy, stealing breath.
I seemed to sink forever,
I'd never get back to the surface alive.
Then my head broke water.
I gulped the free air.
Felt the clean skin of forgiveness,
Left the old man behind
And saw your beaming face.
Everything was new.

¹ Robert Austell, "Baptism as Ritual" September 29, 2013 <https://gspc.net/sermons/baptism-as-ritual/>.