

**Sermon Sunday, January 10, 2016**  
**“Putting the Past in the Past”**

The Bible, both Old and New Testament, is filled with rituals that signify watersheds: the end of one way of life and the beginning of another. The end of being called by this name and now being called by that name. Leaving one's homeland for unknown territory. In the Old Testament people who had violated a purity law were supposed to 'immerse' themselves before offering sacrifice. This made them new, fresh and clean. The symbol of immersion goes as far back as Moses leading Israel through the waters of the Red Sea. Baptism is one of those rituals. What is the history of baptism in the Bible?

The book of Leviticus, while not scintillating reading, outlines detailed instructions for specific actions one was to take to be purified from specific defiling events. "There were many...ritualistic cleanings through bathing and...various ways of immersion under the guidance...of priests. It was not called *Baptism* in the Old Testament though outwardly they are the same thing."

The Greek verb is *baptizo*, meaning "to dip, plunge, immerse," and Christian Baptism was originally by immersion. In Matthew 3, it is clear that baptism required water and John 3 indicates that it required a lot of water. Acts 8 shows that baptism meant going down into the water and coming up out of the water.

So, is "baptism" strictly a Christian word and ritual? One commentary said this: "A simple word search for "baptism" in the Old Testament turns up no matches. However, by the time John the Baptist shows up on the scene and starts dunking people and calling 'for forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1:4), people seem to already have an understanding of what baptism is.... There might have been other sorts of baptisms practiced at the time.... The questions...[asked are] about who was doing the baptizing and on what authority. Nobody seems to be too concerned about the act itself -- as if it was a well understood thing already...."

<http://www.jesus.org/following-jesus/baptism/what-does-baptism-mean.html>

For modern day Christians, there is baptism by immersion as well as by sprinkling water on the head. There is baptism as an infant and there is believer baptism as an adult. On this day, the first Sunday after Epiphany, we recall the baptism of Jesus, not as an infant, but as an adult, by his cousin John. Congregations have an annual opportunity to re-examine and revisit their own baptismal vows.

Many of us were baptized as infants. We didn't promise anything; our parents or godparents made promises on our behalf. We have a chance as adults, here today, to be responsible for our promises. Applying the words used in the service of Holy Communion, renewing your baptismal promises "is open to all who seek the peace that Christ brings. You renew these promises not because you must, but because you may, not to express an opinion but to seek a presence and to pray for a spirit."

Baptism and renewing the promises of this sacrament is a crossroads. Try on for yourself, actually create for yourself, that there's no turning back, only going forward. You are at a watershed. We are together and individually invited to put the past in the past for the sake of a future that does not yet exist. This is a road that is made by walking, to borrow the book title from the women's Bible study. We are choosing to step on to the road before it exists. All promises have that nature: your speaking creates a new future.

Let us look at these promises. Because your reply is a private matter between you and God, we will respond in silence rather than a corporate affirmation.

- *To be a disciple* is to be a follower, a devotee, a student of a master.
- *By the grace of God* indicates that we cannot even be good students without divine support, which we are implying we will request and accept when we receive it.
- *To expose the fruits of darkness*. I find this the most challenging personally. If I promise this, I don't get to be a bystander, an observer of harassment, rudeness, discrimination or cheating or any number of life-denying behaviors. Not if I make this promise.
  - But wait, we do not fulfill these promises in isolation. We cannot. I have often wished that a church would offer self-selecting groups meeting regularly so people could speak frankly about their efforts at living well...making an impact in some way...sharing failures and successes and building muscles for speaking truth to power.

Putting the past *in the past* does not mean forgetting it, blaming it or finding fault with it, shaming it or rejecting it. Quite the opposite. It is simply accepting that the events of the past, good-bad-or-indifferent, are not going on right now. They exist only in memory. In affirming our baptismal promises, we take a big leap of faith and promise to keep focusing on the present moment and listening for God's new word in each of our lives, every single day. There is great joy and excitement in that, if you can catch the meaning.

AMEN