

## 1 Sermon, January 13, 2013

Texts: Matthew 28:16-20, Acts 10:44-48

Title: "Baptize Early, Baptize Often?"

Baptism.

Many of us may think it's not very important.

Most of us probably think that it's not necessary for salvation. But the Bible and the early church had a very different view of baptism.

Baptism was a matter of life and death.

The early church looked at baptism as being born again – literally having a new lease on life – being regenerated in the name and image of Christ.

Why would you want to be born again?

Imagine yourself living in the Middle East in First Century AD.

Life was hand-to-mouth existence in large extended families that mainly never ventured more than a few miles from home. Tiny stone dwellings with dirt floors crammed together with no spaces in between housed hundreds of people with virtually no more than a couple of square feet per person. Clean water was rare, so personal hygiene was scarce and water-borne disease rampant. Bathing was not viewed as necessary or helpful.

Lamp oil was at a premium and not used by upwards of 80% of the population, so life happened between sunrise and sunset, and it was filled with non-stop hours of hard labor and toil, for most children as well as adults. Injury, loss of limbs, digits, eyes, disfigurements were a simple part of normal life.

Women outnumbered men about two-to-one due to work-related death, disease, conscription into service and ordinary violence. Often girls were promised to multiple men to adjust for the odds of survival. Most men didn't really know the girls who were promised to them — males and females rarely interacted in any social form. Travel was unsafe, except in large groups. Mortality rates were high, and the average life span was less than four decades. We often think of Jesus dying young at 33, but 33 was about average. A fifty-year old was a rarity and a sixty-year old was an ancient miracle.

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Skulls from the period show that few retained many of their teeth into adulthood. Vermin — insect and mammal — coexisted in every home and on every person.

Childbirth began as soon after marriage as possible, to girls perhaps 13 or 14 and with infant mortality as high as 60% in some regions, women gave birth at least annually in hopes of producing a sizeable enough family that could work for survival.

Do you see how the idea of being regenerated – born again into a better state – would be very attractive?

It was so attractive that you would face the scary idea of going out into a lake or river – water was considered dangerous – and be dunked under the water three times.

Back then, it wasn't just sin that made you want to be born again, it was the understanding that sin led to your diseases, and so the whole package needed to be regenerated – your sinfulness and your body. You needed to be saved in order to be healed.

Baptism was really about life and death.

This is why the Bible and the early church looked upon baptism as vital – essential to the new life one lived in following Jesus.

So, when Jesus at the end of the gospel of Matthew commanded his disciples to baptize, he was very serious about it.

And when Jesus said to go and make disciples, baptizing them, he was making baptism something that was integral to making disciples.

In Hebrew poetry, parallel phrases are put one after the other, so that making disciples and baptizing are ways of saying the same thing.

Many of the writers of the early church spoke of baptism as regeneration – being born anew. Justin Martyr wrote that those who wish to be Christian should: “. . .pray and entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past. . . . Then they are brought by us to water and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father. . . and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit [Matt. 28:19], they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, "Unless you are born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (*First Apology* 61).

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Tertullian wrote, "[N]o one can attain salvation without baptism, especially in view of the declaration of the Lord, who says, 'Unless a man shall be born of water, he shall not have life' (*On Baptism* 12:1 [A.D. 203]).

Clement wrote in 221 AD: "But you will perhaps say, 'What does the baptism of water contribute toward the worship of God?' In the first place, baptism pleases God. In the second place, when you are regenerated and born again of water and of God, the frailty of your former birth, which you have through men, is cut off, and so . . . you shall be able to attain salvation. . .

The *Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, an anonymous book of 16 short chapters, is probably the earliest known written instructions, outside of the Bible, for administering baptism. The first version of it was written c. 60–80 AD. The second, with insertions and additions, was written c. 100–150 AD. Its instructions on baptism are as follows:

Now about baptism: this is how to baptize. Give public instruction on all these points, and then baptize in running water, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. If you do not have running water, baptize in some other. If you cannot in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Before the baptism, moreover, the one who baptizes and the one being baptized must fast, and any others who can. And you must tell the one being baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand.

In today's reading from the book of Acts, Peter has received a vision. It is a vision of a white sheet descending from heaven containing every known animal, clean and unclean. Peter is told to "get up, kill, and eat." It's a sign to Peter that what he had considered unclean was not unclean. In fact, it was a sign that the holiness code and dietary laws of his Judean faith were not necessary to salvation.

At that time, Peter meets Cornelius, a non-Judean, but a prayerful, God-fearing soldier who wants to do the right thing. Cornelius has also had a vision, a vision of an angel who told him to send for Peter. Then Peter, moved by the Holy Spirit, declares that God shows no partiality, and says that Cornelius and his family can be baptized. They *are* baptized.

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It's hard for us to understand just how radical a thing that was. Peter, raised on the assumption that his own, Judean, people were the only ones special to God, is now recognizing even a hated Roman military commander as blessed by God.

Peter would not have won any points from the average Judean for doing that!

Even more than that, Peter was giving Cornelius and his family the ultimate recognition of holiness.

Cornelius and his family are being reborn in Christ's image. They are being regenerated – made part of God's holy people, whom up to recently Peter had assumed only included his own Judean people – a tiny slice of the world's population.

You see, baptism was based on Judean rituals of cleansing from sin, and it was assumed that non-Judeans were automatically sinners. So Cornelius – it's a very non-Judean name – is being made one with those who have already received God's love and promise.

It's a dramatic story, but you may ask, "So What?"

What does all this stuff about baptism have to do with me? What does this have to do with how I live my life?

Well, just like in first century AD, you need to be regenerated in the image of God. You need to acknowledge your need for a savior. You need to acknowledge your sin. You need to turn aside from focusing on yourself, and focus on the kingdom of God.

It may not be so obvious, because you're a lot more comfortable than people were in the first century AD. But you still need the renewal that comes along with baptism.

You still need to know that your identity is not based on what you accomplish, but on how God loves you, and how you love God and others.

You still need a hope that is based on who God is, and not on outward circumstances.

I'd like to sing you an old-fashioned song, one that gives an idea of what baptism means, baptism as a renewal because Christ has washed away our sin and is restoring us to his image.



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"While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days." Acts 10:44-48, NRSV.

"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "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 obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."" Matthew 28:16-20, NRSV.