

Sermon (6/25/17, Romans 6: 1-11):

I love baptisms! For me, it's one of those moments when the church is at its best. One of my favorite moments is when all things seem to coalesce around the one being baptized.

First, there's God, making visible God's promises of grace and love by way of water and Spirit; a sign and seal that everything we have seen and heard in Christ is something we can forever count on.

Second, there are the parents who stand before us promising to teach their child what faith means through their words, deeds, and participation in the life of the church.

Third, there's the congregation, standing to make their promises to support, teach, and nurture the faith and lives of the baptized and their families.

At the center of it all is the one who is being baptized, in today's case, Hannah. Hannah will be completely unaware of what is happening yet she will be the focus of everyone's loving attention. A rare display of unity, grace, and common purpose in today's world. A rare moment when we remember our needfulness of one another.

Given all this, it's a bit of a challenge to introduce into the mix the passage I just read from Paul's letter to the Romans.

'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? And if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.'" Paul writes.

On a day like today, mentioning the word 'death' let alone thinking about it seems incredibly out of place and even inappropriate. None the less, it is an important part of the meaning and mystery of baptism.

As I have mentioned before, I was a very anxious father when my children were young. As such, I was absolutely terrified the first time I gave my infant daughter a bath. What if I lose my grip? I anxiously wondered. What if she hits her head against the sink or her face slips beneath the water? I understood all too well the dangers of water.

We can't live without water. We need it to survive. Our bodies are mostly made up of water. As we search for evidence of life on other planets, the first thing we look for is liquid water because we know that where water is, life is likely to follow.

We also know that water destroys. It can take life in an instant including just a couple of inches of it in a bath tub. We've seen it's destructive power in communities overrun by flash floods.

The water in this font is an element we understand to be both essential to life and a danger to life. We cannot look at it, feel it, hear it without being reminded of both. It can be beautiful or ugly. It can be the sound of hope or the sound of terror. It can save life or steal it away.

It's a challenging thing to think about on a day like this but what Paul was addressing is important. You see, Paul was writing to a community that was asking the question, 'If God's grace is so radical and so certain, does that mean we can do whatever we want? Can we just go on living as we've always lived?'

Paul's effort in this passage is to demonstrate how radically our identity has shifted because we belong to Christ. In essence, we move from the arena where death defines our lives to the arena where resurrection defines our lives and, as such, this leads to an inevitable change in the way we live

Perhaps we can think of it this way. A defining story for the Hebrew people was the story of the Exodus under the leadership of

Moses. A story Paul knew and understood well.

The Exodus story is about the liberation of the Hebrew people from the enslavement forced upon them by the Pharaoh. A key moment in that journey was when Moses parted the Red Sea, allowing the Hebrew people to cross over to the other side, separating them from Pharaoh's army which wanted to return them to Egypt and slavery.

On the other side of the Red Sea...the Hebrew people were finally free. They were no longer Pharaoh's slaves. While the Promised Land God had assured them of was still a long way off, they were now outside the arena of Pharaoh's cruel control over them. The challenge they now faced was a big one, however. They had to realign their lives around a new reality. How would they live? What did it mean to be God's people instead of Pharaoh's people? What did it mean to be alive in God's grace instead of as good as dead in Pharaoh's prison?

Many inmates must deal with something similar after being incarcerated for a long stretch of time. Making the switch from prison, where their every move is controlled by another, to the freedoms of life outside is a significant leap. As a society, we don't do well helping people make that switch, which is the reason why so many of them end up back behind bars in a short period of time.

Baptism lays before us a switch in orientation that is just as radical. It reveals to us that we are a free people. We are different than we once were. Something in us and about us has radically shifted from death to life. Something about this faith community we belong to is different than anything else that was and is.

We are the Hebrew people on the other side of the Red Sea finally free from Pharaoh's deadly enslavement.

We are alive to a reality where the cross, once a symbol of humanity's worst, is now a sign of God's best. Everything has changed.

We are grafted into the death and resurrection of Christ through baptism, Paul says, and because of that, we can no longer operate like the people we once were. Everything has changed. Death has lost its sting. Resurrection hope now defines us. We can no longer be the same people we once were any more than I can be the same person I once was before I became a father. On the day I held my daughter for the first time, I became a Dad and my entire world changed forever, thanks be to God. On the day Jesus named us as his own, our whole center of gravity shifted and now we must reorient our lives to a new arena where death has lost its enslaving grip and resurrection is our sure and certain hope, thanks be to God.

Sisters and brothers, this promise is for Hannah, for you, for your children and for all who are far off – for all the Lord our God will call. (Acts 2: 39)

To God be all the glory. Amen.