

Sermon “Remember Your Baptism”

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, January 10, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Did you know that one could be ‘de-baptized’? Apparently, for as little as \$4.50, one could buy a ‘certificate of de-baptism’ from the National Secular Society in the U.K. Many apparently had done so already. The de-baptizing movement started in 2009, according to the Times of London, by a man, named John Hunt. Mr. Hunt had requested that his 1953 baptism at the St. Jude and St. Aidan Parish in the Southward Diocese of South London be revoked. He stipulated that because he was only five months old at the time of the baptism, it was not his choice, he had no memory of it, and besides, he no longer believes in God. Mr. Hunt went through a great deal of trouble seeking to have his baptismal record stricken, removed, but the Church of England would not entertain the idea...citing the need to keep historical record. Mr. Hunt then resorted to paying 60 pounds to have his ‘certificate of de-baptism’ recorded in the London Gazette. The case of John Hunt raises an interesting question: how does one remember one’s own baptism, particularly those who were baptized as infants?

Remember your baptism.

It is an exhortation that comes near the end of the rite of baptism, as formulated in the Book of Common Worship of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Addressing those who were just baptized, a minister would instruct, “You are now received by Christ’s appointment into the holy catholic church. Through baptism, God has made you members of the household of God to share with Christ in the priesthood of all believers. Remember your baptism and give thanks. Be one with us in the Church.” The rite of baptism is one of the two sacraments observed in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Sacrament, by definition, as formulated by Saint Augustine, is an outward sign of an inward grace. Water is the outward sign administered to the baptized, often in a communal worship, during a public ceremony witnessed and celebrated by friends and families. Faith is the inward grace. Baptism, just like faith, is considered a gift of

God, freely given by God, and freely received by us. Its 'effectiveness' is not tethered only to the profession of faith of the baptized, but also to the community of faith that promises to guide and nurture them, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to follow the way of Christ and to be faithful members of God's church. It is with such an understanding, that our denomination along with other Reformed traditions, practice infant baptism. "As those baptized in infancy are called in later years to make personal profession of Christ. What is born may die. What is grafted may wither. Congregation and those baptized must strive to nurture life in Christ." (Living Faith 7.6.4).

Remember your baptism.

In Acts 19:1-7, the passage that we read earlier, Apostle Paul in one of his missionary journeys through Asia Minor, came across a group of disciples who were somewhat confused about their baptism. He put to them a curious question, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" These clueless disciples replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit". The follow-up question that Paul then asked is illuminating: "In to what then were you baptized?" It turns out that they were baptized into the baptism of repentance of sin by John the baptizer. Notice that Paul did not ask "who baptized you" but "in to what were you baptized?" The question of who is so much less important than the purpose of 'to what' and the identity of 'to whom' one is baptized into. That continues to be the pattern of the Church of Christ Jesus to this day. In Presbyterian Church in Canada, as stated in the Living Faith 7.6.1, "Baptism is a sign and seal of our union with Christ and with his church. Through it we share in the death and resurrection of Christ and are commissioned to his service." The disciples that Paul met that day may not have known about Jesus. But upon hearing that John the baptizer testified to the one that was to come after him, that is, in Jesus, they were more than glad to be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. "When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— altogether there were about twelve of them."

Remember your baptism.

I do remember my own baptism. It took place when I was fourteen, in the the Church of Living Spring — my home congregation in the city of Taipei. I was baptized alongside my father and sister in the community I

grew up in faith. Mom was the first in the family to come to the Christian faith. She was baptized along with my older brother. My sister and I waited, just so Dad would be ready to be received into faith. I recalled shortly prior to the baptismal service, I had attended a Christian summer camp. I was so inspired by the message of personal salvation, and so seemingly filled with the Holy Spirit that I gave a testimonial during my baptism...declaring that I was ready to be used by the Lord, in whatever capacity that He deemed fit. What I did not anticipate was immigrating to Canada a year later, and subsequently underwent a ten years of rebellious period away from organized religion, from the Church. Nevertheless, God was most gracious and He never gave up on me. He brought me back to the Church in the most amazing way, alongside of Daisy whom I would marry and journey together in faith and in love, until today. As I look back to my baptism, the testimonial I gave, no, more like the pledge I made had marked me in some way, as God had called on me to serve Him again and again.

Remember you baptism.

I wonder how Jesus would remember his own baptism? It is a remarkable story, truly, and it is recorded in all four Gospels. Although each with a slightly different emphasis, the basic premise remains the same. John the baptizer was baptizing in the river Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. His message was so compelling that the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him. Just so you understand what it took to make that trek. The distance from Jerusalem to the river Jordan is about 50km, so roughly a 2-3 days journey on foot, accompanying by an elevation drop of 1,100 meters. The landscape is hot and arid, and without cover nor shelter. All that is to say, those who gathered around John to receive his baptism were serious folks who took their faith seriously.

But John did not indulge in praise nor bask in adulation, he explained that, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:7-8). Shortly after, Jesus of Nazareth came to John to be baptized. The focus here in the Gospel of Mark, was not on who had the authority to baptize whom (I think that was recorded in the Gospel of Matthews). The focus here was on what transpired when Jesus emerged from the water. The Scripture informs us that Jesus saw, "the heavens torn apart and the Spirit

descending like a dove on him” (v.10). The phrase ‘torn apart’ paints an image of the sky, like a giant canvas, being ripped open forcibly. It alludes to the plea of the prophet, in Isaiah 64:1, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”. It points to the eventual death of Jesus on the cross, when at that precise moment, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mark 15:38).

In case those witnessing that baptism had any doubt of the true identity of Jesus; in case those of us hearing this story have any uncertainty that God was doing something extraordinary, a voice came from heaven, proclaiming, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (v.11) The voice of the Lord, as described by psalmist (in Psalm 29), is powerful, full of majesty, the voice of the Lord thunders over mighty water, and the voice of the Lord breaks cedars of Lebanon. Now that voice, confirms not only the identity of Jesus, but also how he is loved by the Father. You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Remember your baptism.

When we are baptized into Christ Jesus, our Lord and saviour, we are baptized into the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, and also into a collective identity as God’s adoptive sons and daughters. Forming such an identity, belonging to such a community is not easy. We live in a society where it is easy to click on that ‘like’, to give two thumbs up, to even subscribe, but it is not so easy to love. We live in a world where it is easy to shout in ALL CAPS, to block, to even cancel, but it is not so easy to forgive. Forming and belonging to a community of faith — that practices love and forgiveness — that takes a life time. The risks are great, the rewards intangible, and it can disappear in a breath.

However, we are not alone. The Spirit of God is with us and continues to recreate, to redeem, and to sustain us. In baptism, we become part of a people, the tribe of Jesus as I sometimes call it. In retelling the story of the baptism of our Lord, in witnessing and celebrating the baptism of others, we re-live and remember our own baptism, not as individuals, but collectively as the people of God.

Remember our baptism and give thanks.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**