

Psalm 29

¹Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

²Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.

³The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.

⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

⁶He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

⁹The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king for ever.

¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him

in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

SERMON

I have so many lovely memories of baptisms. Obviously I remember the baptisms of my own three children, that's sort of a given. But I remember the very first baby I baptized, his name was Richard. Or the first adult I baptized, Kris. On that occasion I hadn't thought through the awkwardness of trying to baptize an adult, who would inevitably be taller than me. Do I reach up and like, flick the water at him? Do I ask him to stoop over? Thankfully I was saved by my organist, who had thought ahead of me and put a kneeler next to the font that morning. Kneeling adult, much easier to baptize.

I remember the class I took in seminary about baptism. It wasn't all theology and writing good liturgy. No, there was the day with the plastic baby and the way-too-big-for-me men's Geneva robe, you know, those flowing flouncy sleeve robes most Presbyterians wear? I had to put it on and gracefully baptize the plastic baby doll. The professor videoed me doing it, and then the whole class watched and picked apart my baptism technique. I learned valuable lessons, like making sure the baby doesn't get lost in the folds of your robe and leaning slightly forward, so you don't get water all over yourself. Needless to say, by the time 15 seminarians got done that day, that plastic baby was well and truly holy and set apart for God's work in the world. Or something.

On my last Sunday with my dear church in Michigan, it was Easter, and since everyone knew I was leaving they came out of the woodwork. We had 9 baptisms and an infant dedication that morning. It was a wet, crazy, flower filled madhouse with toddlers and parents chasing each other all over the chancel, and it was beautiful.

Baptism is so beautiful and so important. Not because it includes the antique white gowns and family flown in from out of town and a big brunch or whatever to celebrate. It's important because it signals a welcome, the ever broadening reach of the family of God to welcome the stranger, the child, the friend. Now, there are a ton of other things Baptism symbolizes: new beginnings, the renunciation of evil in ourselves and in the world around us, death and resurrection, and more. But I find that of all the kaleidoscopic meanings behind it, I reach most often for that oldie but goodie—welcome. Being welcomed into the family of faith, the body of Christ, the Kingdom of God.

And I love welcome as a primary theme for baptism because, for me, it links it to two very important theological touch stones—communion and death.

First, communion. When Baptism is understood as a welcome, it pairs up with Communion as a sacrament of hospitality. The welcome of the water, the welcome of Christ's table, they are tangible reminders that the circle we find ourselves in should be ever widening. A writer I like actually suggests we stop drawing circles and instead draw horseshoes, with an open side, where others are always being welcomed in. I love that. And when Baptism and Communion are seen as sacraments of welcome and hospitality, I am reminded that

the Body of Christ, the work of God in this world, is indeed the work of the horseshoe—ever open, ever expanding, always hospitable.

And second, I love baptism as a welcome because we believe our baptism is complete in death. We are baptized with Christ, we live our lives in ministry like Christ, we die like Christ, and then just as he was raised, so too we join Christ in the resurrection. He becomes the pattern for our life, our death, and the life to come. Baptism is the river that flows from our welcome here on earth to our welcome in the company of God, it's the connecting channel between this life and the next. If baptism is a welcome into the family of faith, it's a beautiful bookend with death. Baptism isn't an ending, but instead it's a promise and a hope—the full knowledge that those we love go ahead of us, into the presence of God, to be welcomed among the saints in the light, and one day we will too. In baptism we learn to both welcome the new, and let go and trust that those who go before us are being welcomed anew, and to see the ever flowing river between one and the other.

It is good to remember our baptisms and be glad. To dwell for a moment, a hymn, a prayer in the depth of the mystery of being welcomed into such a broad and deep and ancient and new family. And to give thanks for the horseshoe which expands evermore and for the gift of baptism which bookends our life.