

**Claimed, Cleansed, Called**  
Galatians 3:27-4:8

*Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost/ 10<sup>th</sup> October 2021*

Our journey begins with baptism. Our calling, our vocation, our ministry, our life all flow from the font of blessing. We are born out of these waters. We begin at the font, in the waters of our baptism, where we are claimed, cleansed, and called—again and again.

From the Greek *baptizo*, meaning “to dip” or “to plunge” into water, baptism doesn’t necessarily mean “to wash,” although it’s implied. And, to the chagrin of many Presbyterians, it doesn’t mean to pour or sprinkle a little water over the head of a baby or child (although we will do this shortly). *Baptizomai* means to dip or to plunge *under*, as to be overwhelmed, overcome by water, swamped, fully immersed. To plunge down or into the water implies a surging up and out of the water. Going down into the depths is followed by a coming out of the depths. Dying and rising. And it’s the rising, up out of the water after having gone down in and through the depths, then surging up to the surface, which signifies the beginning of something new.

Water is elemental. Around 350 million years ago, we swam our way out from primordial waters and crawled upon dry ground. We develop in water. Scripture tells us that water is associated with birth and new birth and renewal, beginnings, and new beginnings—from the waters of Genesis to the waters of the flood; Israel’s exodus from Egypt through walls of water, from slavery to liberation; Jesus gestating in the water of Mary’s womb. And it was at the River Jordan—in the river itself—that Jesus claimed his identity as a beloved child of God, and received his calling, discovered his vocation, and realized the purpose of his life.

Today, we often think of baptism as the first step in becoming a Christian or the ritual of admittance into the church. Both associations are true *today*, but they don’t make any sense when applied to Jesus, who wasn’t baptized a Christian and never joined a church.

Jesus plunged into the depths, into the chaos of the waters, into the turbulent tides of the river, and emerged, free from its control, released from that which overwhelmed him. And then he came up out of the water. He rose out of the water into a new life, conscious of a new identity borne in the depths when he was underwater, gasping for air. He stepped out of the water with a new sense of God’s purpose for his life, empowered by the Spirit. “You are my beloved, in whom I take great delight” (Mt. 3:17).

From the beginning of the Christian experience, we know that to be baptized meant to be baptized *into* Christ (not necessarily into the church). The Apostle Paul tells us we are baptized *into* Christ, which means we have been clothed with Christ through our baptism, which means that we belong to Christ, which means that, like Christ, we belong to God. We are children of God. The Spirit of God’s Son is alive in our spirit, and so we cry, “Abba!”

To be baptized means that we are claimed as a child of God, cleansed, made new. To be claimed inevitably means to be called, called to love, serve, forgive, strive after all that is good, and all that God considers good. There’s something so elemental about baptism that it drives us

“right back to the beginning,” as German Luther pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) once said, writing from a Nazi prison cell in Berlin in May, 1944. He was reflecting on the upcoming baptism of his namesake Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge, the son of Eberhard Bethge (1909-2000), one of Bonhoeffer’s closest and dearest friends. “We are once again being driven right back to the beginning.”<sup>1</sup> Driven by the cataclysm of the war, which forced the German Church (both Protestant and Catholic) into crisis. In letters and scraps of paper smuggled out of Tegel prison in Berlin, we find Bonhoeffer wrestling with profound existential questions:

*What does it mean to be a Christian?*

*What does it mean for me to say, “I am Christian”?*

*Who is Christ for me?*

*What does it mean to be his disciple?*

*What is the Church?*

*What is its future?*

*What will it look like?*

It was the occasion of a baptism that drove Bonhoeffer back to the beginning of his understanding—because that’s what baptism does. Whether we share in or witness a baptism or remember our own, baptism drives us back to the beginning, sending us back to the waters, plunging us down into the depths, so that we can rise—again and again—with answers to these questions, to be God’s people in the world. It all begins at the font.

Today, we are driven not by the cataclysm of war but by this global pandemic, which has been cataclysmic. These past eighteen or nineteen months have been a wake-up call, a lot of self-reflection. What do we value most? What grants life meaning and purpose? What do I want to give my life to? To whom will I entrust the deepest core of myself, the core of my being? To what, to whom will I entrust my heart? Who are the people I wish to travel with, living into, and wrestling with these questions? Where is this community? Where do I belong?

The waters of baptism ask us, again and again: Who is Christ to you? What does it mean for you to be his disciple? As Bonhoeffer knew, our baptism into Christ leads us to consider anew—or maybe for the first time—the heart of the Christian life: “reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship.”<sup>2</sup> A life shaped by love that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). The entire scope and reach, height, and depth of the Christian life find their origins in the waters of our baptism. And in these waters—and every time we plunge into them—we get to affirm (and reaffirm) who we are and whose we are.

And, when we rise from their depths, like Jesus, we discover (or rediscover) what we're called to be and become, by God's grace, we hear what is being asked of us.



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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Thoughts on the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Touchstone, 1997), 299.

<sup>2</sup> The quotation continues, “—all these are so difficult and so remote that we hardly venture any *more to speak of them.*” For more on Bonhoeffer, see Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).