

“A Clean Start”

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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: Luke 3:15-17

Why 2010?

Two days ago, we entered a new year according to the calendar. The determination of that year, 2010, was not some arbitrary impulse but rather the recognition that when Christ came to earth it changed everything – even the way we determine our time. As we enter this new year, our minds and hearts are full with the fresh memory of the events of the year just passed: TARP implementation, Inauguration, Stimulus Bill, Unemployment Rates, Our own Job Losses and Cuts in Pay, Security Breaches, Health Care Reform. But in our personal lives, we have seen banks take advantage of us just because they could; we have worried about declining home values and whether we will have money to retire and health care to allow us to enjoy it. We worry about the impact of all this on our children and generations yet unborn. We have had health problems, lost loved ones, and struggled with routine demands that continue to grow. The toll all of this takes on our finances, our professional relationships, and our personal relationships is more devastating than we normally are willing to admit.

I come this morning to encourage you not to drag all the baggage of 2009 into 2010. We have an opportunity for a fresh, clean start, so let us allow the pain of 2009 to be mitigated by the promise of 2010. No, everything does not magically change just because we have a new year. But we can change and determine to march boldly into 2010 with a power at work within us that is superior to any ideology, any military force, or any economic dynamic in this world. We celebrate in this holy season the birth of One who is not only out of this world, but willing to come into it to save us “while we were yet sinners.”

The birth of Jesus was a watershed moment in world history. He brought us redemption and made a way for us to receive forgiveness for our sins. But he also sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within us universally for the very first time. The Spirit that would invite, receive, guide, teach, and sustain those of us who are willing to experience the Spirit's presence. Often we go from Christmas and the baby in the manger to Good Friday and the Christ on the Cross. We recognize his presence again at the Resurrection on the third day but give little thought to what Christ has done for us at any other time. I challenge you to change that in 2010. You are Christians, or if you have never been baptized, you are at least investigating what this Christ might mean in your life by your presence here today.

Jesus Came for Everyone

This is not an idea that is universally accepted in the Christian world, but it is clear in scripture that Jesus is the Savior of all the world. Those of you who joined us for our recent study of the Acts of the Apostles will recall that the first church conference in Jerusalem was over the issue of whether salvation was just for the Jews or whether it is indeed for everyone. The church affirmed the witness of Peter, Paul, and others that Jesus came and sacrificed for everyone, Jew and non-Jew. He sacrificed for you.

We still think that some of us are a bit more worthy than others, however. An arrogant Christian is a poor witness, and that issue of who is more entitled to what was settled in

the Christmas story itself. Remember how the Angels appeared to the poor shepherds living on the hillside watching their flocks by night. These were the shepherds who were raising the lambs that would be sacrificed in the Temple in Jerusalem. (Remember how John the Baptist said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." – John 1:29) The shepherds' flocks were more important to the world than they were. Sound familiar? Society often values profit and power more than people with the devastating results we saw in 2008 and 2009. But not God! He chose to reveal the birth of Jesus in the grandest way to the poorest and weakest in society. Only later did a similar revelation come to the learned Wise Men who traveled to Herod's palace in search of the newborn king. But it did come. The poor, the wealthy, the powerful – all received the news and handled it in different ways. The shepherds believed and went to see the child. Then they told everyone they saw, but those they told thought they were crazy. Herod was sitting with a very weak claim to the throne, so he was worried that this new king would have a greater claim. His thoughts were on self-preservation and retaining his power, even if it meant killing all the male infants in Bethlehem. The Wise Men, with all their wealth and power, brought expensive gifts, but more importantly, they worshiped him.

Responding to the Gift

For the shepherds, the Wise Men and Herod, the issue was their response to the birth of Christ. For us, the issue is the same. How have you responded to the coming of Christ? Have you accepted the fact that he is your Savior? Is his birth important to you because of the decorations and gifts? We love the decorations, the songs of the season, and of course the gifts, but did you enjoy all that just to have large credit card balances in January? God did not create us to be slaves to an economic system; slaves to habits and lifestyle; slaves to sin. God created us to be his sons and daughters and heirs to his grace and redemption through Christ. He created us to be free. Knowing that, what will be different in 2010? How will YOU respond?

Receiving the Gift

Most of us have been baptized as an outward and visible sign that we have received the gift of God's grace and accepted the sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. Acceptance of God's redeeming work constituted a covenant that we made either at our baptism or at our confirmation. That defines who we are.

President George H. W. Bush was touring a nursing home one day. As he walked the hall with his entourage, he came upon an old man slowly making his way in the opposite direction. The President reached out his hand and greeted the old gentleman, asking gently, "Sir, do you know who I am?" The man stared blankly for a moment. Then his eyes focused. Slowly he shook his head. "No," he admitted, "I don't know who you are. But if you ask the nurses, they can tell you."

Baptism tells the world who you are. How easy to forget the promises we made – who we are in Christ. Who tells you who you are? We receive our identity from others, from the expectations of friends and colleagues, from the labels society puts upon us, and from the influence of family. To become Christian is to receive a *new* identity. You no longer allow others to tell you who you are. Christ now claims you and instructs you. A Christian is one who has "put on Christ." Baptism celebrates becoming that new person. That is why the church's ritual begins with putting off the old, renouncing sin and the evil powers of the world, and pledging our loyalty to Christ.

Don't let January 1, 2011 find you with a boatload of regrets, a pile of "what ifs," and a litany of excuses. We are not all we can be because we do not rely totally on the One who created us, saved us, and sustains us. We are not all we can be as a church because we do not rely totally on the God who called us into being, died on the cross overcoming death for our sake, and guides us in ways that enable us to be his Body in his world.

Reaffirming the Covenant

Reaffirm your baptismal covenant today. If you have never been baptized, we invite you to respond to the grace of God stirring in your spirit this morning. Talk to us, and let us walk with you as you make an everlasting covenant with your God.

Now, let me ask some questions of all of us. These answers must not be taken lightly, because you are making a commitment to God before this company of witnesses and before God himself.

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?

I do.

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

I do.

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?

I do.

According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world?

I will.

In a moment, I will ask you to come and complete the renewal of the solemn covenant that you made to God when you received Christ as your Lord and Savior. Come to the water again this morning and be refreshed and renewed.

(Pouring of the Water into the Baptismal Font)

Water is needed to sustain life. The Living Water of Christ is needed to sustain you in all the circumstances of life. Remember how God used water. When nothing existed, he swept across the dark waters and brought forth light. In the days of Noah, he saved those on the ark through water. After the floods, he sent a rainbow. When he saw his people as slaves in Egypt, he led them to freedom through the sea. A generation later, he brought Israel through the Jordan to the Promised Land. In the fullness of time, Jesus came, nurtured in the water of the womb. Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, anointed by the Holy Spirit, and proclaimed God's Son by God himself. Jesus calls his disciples to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection and to make disciples of all nations.

Prayer: Oh God, pour out your Spirit and by this gift of water call to our remembrance the grace declared to us in our baptism. For you have washed away our sins and you clothe us in righteousness throughout our lives, that dying and rising with Christ, we may

share in his final victory. All praise to you Eternal God, through your Son Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns forever. Amen.

(Instructions will be given here. The people come and place their hands in the water while those presiding and holding towels repeat, "Remember your baptism and be thankful.")

Prayer

A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism

Who Tells You Who You Are?

Who tells you who you are? We receive our identity from others, from the expectations of friends and colleagues, from the labels society puts upon us, and from the influence of family. To become Christian is to receive a new identity. You no longer allow others to tell you who you are. Christ now claims you and instructs you. A Christian is one who has "put on Christ." Baptism celebrates becoming that new person. That is why the church's ritual begins with putting off the old, renouncing sin and the evil powers of the world, and pledging our loyalty to Christ.

God Initiates the Covenant

We also believe that in baptism God initiates a covenant with us, announced with the words, "The Holy Spirit works within you, that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ." This is followed by the sign-act of laying hands on the head, or the signing of the cross on the forehead with oil. The word covenant is a biblical word describing God's initiative in choosing Israel to be a people with a special mission in the world, and Israel's response in a life of faithfulness. The baptismal covenant calls us to a similar vocation.

God Has Chosen Us

Christians have also understood the baptismal covenant in light of Jesus' baptism. At Jesus' baptism, God said: "This is my son." While Jesus' relation to God as Son is unique, for Christians baptism means that God has also chosen us as daughters and sons, and knows us intimately as a parent. So the most important things about us, our true identity, is that we are now sons and daughters of God. That is why the introduction to the United Methodist Baptismal Covenant states, "We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit." The introduction also says, "Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we are initiated into Christ's holy church."

Baptism Is the Door

From the beginning, baptism has been the door through which one enters the church. It was inconceivable to many that one could respond to God's grace by reciting the renunciations, affirming one's faith in Christ and loyalty to the Kingdom, without joining the fellowship of those who are committed to mature in that faith. As the "Body of Christ" in the world, baptism commissions us to use our gifts to strengthen the church and to transform the world.

Why Baptize Babies?

From the earliest times, children and infants were baptized and included in the church. As scriptural authority for this ancient tradition, some scholars cite Jesus' words, "Let the little children come to me...for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14). However, a more consistent argument is that baptism, as a means of grace, signifies God's initiative in the process of salvation. John Wesley preached "prevenient grace," the grace that works in our lives before we are aware of it, bringing us to faith. The baptism of children and their inclusion in the church before they can respond with their own confirmation of faith is a vivid and compelling witness to prevenient grace.

Baptism Is Forever

Because baptism is a sacrament of God's grace and a covenant that God has initiated, it should not be repeated. However, God's continuing and patient forgiveness, God's prevenient grace, will prompt us to renew the commitment first made at our baptism. At such a time, instead of rebaptism, The United Methodist Church offers the ritual for the reaffirmation of baptismal vows, which implies that, while God remains faithful to God's half of the covenant, we are not always faithful to our promises. Our half of the covenant is to confess Christ as our Savior, trust in his grace, serve him as Lord in the church, and carry out his mission against evil, injustice, and oppression.

Baptism Is the Beginning, Not the End

You have heard people say, "I was baptized Methodist," or "I was baptized Presbyterian," which could mean that in baptism they got their identity papers and that was the end of it. But baptism is not the end. It is the beginning of a lifelong journey of faith. It makes no difference whether you were baptized as an adult or as a child; we all start on that journey at baptism. For the child, the journey begins in the nurturing community of the church, where he or she learns what it means that God loves you. At the appropriate time, the child will make his or her first confession of faith in the ritual the church traditionally calls confirmation. Most often, this is at adolescence or at the time when the person begins to take responsibility for his or her own decisions. If you experienced God's grace and were baptized as an adult or received baptism as a child and desire to reaffirm your baptismal vows, baptism still marks the beginning of a journey in the nurturing fellowship of the caring, learning, worshipping, serving congregation.

What Is a Sacrament?

The word sacrament is the Latin translation of the Greek word *mysterion*. From the early days of the church, baptism was associated with the mystery that surrounds God's action in our lives. That means that at best our words can only circumscribe what happens, but not define it. We cannot rationally explain why God would love us "while we were yet sinners" and give his only begotten Son that we should not perish but have eternal life. That is the most sacred and unfathomable mystery of all. We can experience God's grace at any time and in any place, but in the sacrament of baptism we routinely experience that amazing grace.

—*From A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* by Mark C. Trotter. Copyright © 2001 by The United Methodist Publishing House.