

## “TO BE WITNESSES”

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Acts 1:1-11 • Ephesians 1:15-23 • Luke 24:44-53

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth.” —Acts 1, verse 8

Today we have baptised a child. We have invoked the Holy Spirit to claim her as a part of the Body of Christ, the Church. There is a statement we often omit, immediately following the universal baptismal formula, “I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That statement proclaims, “Ellis, child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever.”

Annie Dillard writes, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."

And she is right. Next week we will celebrate Pentecost, retelling the ancient story of the birth of the Church. And how did the Holy Spirit appear? Not in sprinkled drops of water, but in tongues of flame! The Holy Spirit is synonymous with super-natural power . . . God's power . . . the power that raised Jesus from the dead.

And that is precisely what I just recited in the prayer over the water; it recounts God's power through salvation history, specifically when that power was manifest in water. Let me repeat part of that prayer:

In the time of Noah,  
you destroyed evil by the **waters** of the flood,  
giving righteousness a new beginning.  
You led Israel out of slavery,  
through the **waters** of the sea, . . .  
In the **waters** of Jordan  
Jesus was baptized by John  
and anointed with your Spirit.  
By the ***baptism of his own death and resurrection***,  
Christ set us free from sin and death,  
and opened the way to eternal life.  
We thank you, O God, for the **water** of baptism.  
In it we are buried with Christ in his death.  
From it we are raised to share in his resurrection,  
Through it we are reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Annie Dillard is right — we should all have donned crash helmets this morning as we began the service of baptism!

A colleague was reflecting on this prayer when he wrote, “Sometimes the Old Testament may seem like a

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waste of good paper. After all, Jesus didn't come until the New Testament. Besides, have you seen how much thicker the Old Testament is than the New Testament? It's full of laws that we don't follow and already fulfilled prophecies. The First Letter of Peter, however, takes us back to the beginning. When we think of baptism, we usually only go back to John the Baptist. We don't flip back a few hundred pages and remember Noah's ark. And why should we? There was no crazy man [in the wilderness] proclaiming God's news, no dove descending from the sky, no voice of God, as there was at Jesus' baptism. . . . Oh, wait. Noah was a crazy guy. The dove flew back with a branch. God was a major player in the whole story. As 1 Peter says, "Eight persons were saved through water" in Noah's ark. Through baptism, we are marked to share in Noah's heritage and God's promise never to destroy us. The Old Testament gives baptism a new depth; it becomes a reminder of God's power instead of some random bath in the middle of Israel. I guess that Old Testament isn't such a waste of paper after all, he concludes.<sup>1</sup> The crash helmet for Noah's family was the bow in the clouds.

Joe Walker tells a story about baptism from his days as an Army chaplain. He recalls one particular day when a prisoner requested to be baptized and become a member of the church. The man's crime was murder. Joe reflects that if ever there was a person who did not deserve divine forgiveness it was this man. But as Joe spoke with him he felt that his remorse was genuine, and his plea for forgiveness was heartfelt.

As the two men continued talking, the prisoner poured out his soul, never blaming circumstances or claiming he was not guilty of the crime. Joe set the date for his baptism and joining of the church. What came to Joe's mind was how Jesus spent much of his time accepting people whom the religious leaders viewed with scorn – tax collectors, lepers, thieves, and other sinners deemed as unqualified to be forgiven or saved.

Many years later, as Joe reflected on his time serving as a military chaplain, he made the bold claim that nothing he did was as important as extending forgiveness and grace to this young man.

Scripture teaches us that no one deserves God's grace or unconditional love. And yet, in Revelation, we read these words, "And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift." The gift of salvation is available to all people; sometimes we in the church forget this truth. Perhaps we should put on our crash helmets and seek out the people living in our community whose lives would be transformed if we showered them with God's unconditional love?<sup>2</sup>

And yet, in the context of worship, in our safe sanctuaries, it is the softer side of baptism that we usually consider. And that softer side is a sign of the grace of God, the all-powerful God of all that is, offering us life abundant.

An elder in a Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque NM shares this experience during a baptism in his church: "Well, I've been sitting here reading all these epistles about the comings and goings of the congregations and the future of the church, and mostly it is kinda depressing. I'm just a peon in the pews so I don't get to (or have to) deal with the leadership (or lack thereof) to have a feel for the thread of hope that is keeping us together. However, sometimes there is a gift of grace that interjects itself into life and lets you know that the Spirit is moving among us. I remember a definition of grace from the Rev. [Shannon] Webster that went something like when you see a turtle on the top of a mailbox, you know it didn't get there by itself. Anyhow, the grace that entered my life this morning was a baptism. Only it wasn't your ordinary baptism in the sense that it was readily apparent that the Spirit was obviously present and moving among us. It started with the introduction of the infant who promptly responded to the mention of her name by smiling, spreading her arms, and chuckling as if to say, "Yup, that's me!" Then when it came time for the baptism, we had to wait because she was sucking on the pastor's thumb. Yes, a first for him and most of the rest of us. She continued

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to be bright and cheerful throughout and when taken around to the congregation beamed proudly as if to say, "I appreciate your support and willingness to teach me, but I've got a whole bunch of stuff to teach you in return." Couple that with the presence of a large extended family and one of my favorite songs, "I was there to hear your borning cry," and I was saved. Nourished by the knowledge that with each other's support and a willingness to keep my eyes open, grace abounds and the Spirit will move us in the right direction. However, like that little girl, it will take a lot of time and a lot of giving for the church to grow into the place it ought to be. So this is a long rambling tapestry to say that it only takes a child to remind us that we won't get where we need to be without grace.<sup>3</sup>

It is by grace that we come here without needing crash helmets to thwart the immense power of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism initiates us into God's family, but it also begins our living for God. The Holy Spirit's gifts aren't granted to thrill us or to impress others but to equip us in living for and serving God. Finally, when we've become thoroughly used to serving God on earth, we'll someday experience that God has even more for us in heaven.

Here's a glimpse of what that might be like:

In front of the sanctuary of a certain large church, there is a fountain and pond of water, in the middle of which stands a rather somber-looking life-size bronze statue of Jesus, with arms outstretched, as he might have looked coming up from the water of baptism. It is not a particularly joyful representation. But on a particular evening, after a performance by the African Children's Choir, the people coming out of the church were so "up" that the joy was contagious. They had seen little children, rescued from the massive tragedy that afflicts so many children in the third world, singing songs of faith and hope. Some of the teenage girls present that night were so excited that they started dancing around the rim of the pool and stepping over to a place where they could hug the statue of Jesus and hold his hands. They appeared to be dancing with Jesus. Suddenly it seemed a joyful and perfectly appropriate thing. When we are caught up in the experience of hope and of love, we may very well live in a way that amounts to dancing with Jesus to the same music that Jesus hears.<sup>4</sup>

I'd like to close with a personal story of a baptism where the grace of God was evident, despite the fear and cynicism of us mortals; and where the joy of abundant life became manifest. I responded to a phone inquiry and entered into a conversation that went like this:

“Hello, this is the pastor. I understand you're interested in having your son baptized.”

“Yes. Well, although Joey's 4, he looks like an 18 month-old child. His needs have restricted our church activities for a few years, but he's now old enough and mainstreamed in special ed preschool, and we'd like to get back to church. We'd like to have him baptised, and also find out what needs to be done to accommodate him in church school. We hope we can have him baptized sometime this fall in between out-of-town trips for surgeries.”

On the Sunday that Joey was baptized, the font was moved to the back of the sanctuary due to the presence of all the bell choir tables in the chancel area. Symbolically, of course, this was appropriate – a historic location for the font, representing our entrance into the Church, the Body of Christ, through baptism. However, this was the first time this arrangement had been tried, and there was a prevailing sense of disorientation. Things were a bit crowded as the families of those being baptized gathered in a small area adjacent to the narthex; the congregation had to turn around in their seats; the font, babies, and pastors weren't visible past the row of eager parents and sponsors; and there was a slight sense of all of us having

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been displaced.

When his turn came, the pastor lifted Joey and baptized him. “Joey, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” And Joey’s small voice rang out in response, “Thank you!” And with those two words, he dissipated all the discomfort and made it seem as though the font and we were exactly where we were supposed to be.<sup>5</sup>

Every day is a time to remember your baptism and give thanks, a time to begin again. A charge to be witnesses to God’s power and God’s grace in our lives. A charge to live our lives — every day — with meaning and purpose. Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Even on the cross, Jesus offered life to the thief; even on the cross he offered forgiveness to those who murdered him. Through baptism we symbolically share that death with him, so that we can then in spirit and truth and substance, be raised with him to eternal life. And in between the birth and the death, in the waiting time between the death and the resurrection, we have this ministry. To witness. To love. To forgive. And to rejoice. “Remember your baptism and rejoice!”

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## **ENDNOTES**

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1. From “Free Sermon Illustrations” in SermonSuite.com, online sermon resource.
  2. Story by Tim S. at <https://store.sermonsuite.com/content.php?p=search> (The search was for keyword “baptism”.)
  3. Posted by Jon Shannon Webster on [scarredalabama@yahogroups.com](mailto:scarredalabama@yahogroups.com), Aug 18, 2007. He prefaced this with “- let me share with you a “view from the pew”, if we can call it that – a posting off of an Internet blog, (which I do have permission to reproduce) from Robert Busch, an Elder at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque. "Robert Douglas Busch" <busch@...> wrote: . . .
  4. From “Free Sermon Illustrations from The Immediate Word Sermon Resource”, at <https://store.sermonsuite.com/content.php?i=788030159>.
  5. True story, Joey Fix, Pt. Pleasant Presbyterian Church.