

Laying Hands On

Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17

Today the Christian Calendar celebrates the beginning of the Season of Epiphany with the Baptism of our Lord. As we begin this day of celebration, I think it important to look at baptism and what it means. What does Baptism mean to you? How do you define baptism? Is baptism really important?

Baptism, in the mind of some, is more about me choosing God or volunteerism. However, God chooses us in baptism, names us, claims us as his very own, and calls us his beloved. Luke 3: as Jesus is baptized the Holy Spirit descends upon him as a flame and a voice from the heavens says, "You are my Son in whom I am well pleased." Emmanuel means God is with us in all times and in all places. Jesus is with us in the baptismal waters, staking claim to our lives on behalf of our Lord. In fact, Jesus stood in line with the others to be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit, the same as all others.

A little boy was asked in Sunday School to explain baptism. He said, "It's when the preacher holds you under water until you think about Jesus."

A man, a woman and a redneck were scheduled to be baptized. The man baptized first. When he came out of the water, he said, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want!" Then the woman was baptized. She came out of the water and said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!" Now it was the redneck's turn. He didn't know any verses from the Bible, so when he came out of the water he yelled, "Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"

A little boy asked Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in California, "When can I get advertised?" He meant "baptized" but he made the right point – baptism is advertising that you're a Christian.

A friend of mine, not Presbyterian, explained immersion to me this way: "You don't make a pickle by taking a cucumber and sprinkling a little vinegar over it. You immerse it."

In his book *Craddock Stories*, celebrated preacher Fred Craddock tells of an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. A strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself. "I am from around these parts," he said. "My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school, I ate lunch alone. In my early teens, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He looked closely at my face. I knew that he, too, was trying to guess who my father was. 'Well, boy, you are a child of. . .' and then he paused. When he spoke again he said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.' I left church that day a different person," the now-elderly man said. "In fact, that was the beginning of my life." "What's your name?" Dr. Craddock asked. He answered, "Ben Hooper. My name is Ben Hooper." Dr. Craddock said he vaguely recalled from when he was a kid, his father talking about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected a fellow who had been born out of wedlock as the governor of their state. His name was Ben Hooper.

Children of God, remember that you have been baptized and rejoice. If you never have been baptized, then find a church and claim your inheritance. Amen.