

Baptism Ministers the Closeness of Jesus

by Stewart Ruch

Bishop Stewart Ruch's sermon emphasizes baptism as a profound minister of closeness to Jesus, signifying new birth and a transformative life in Christ.

Duration: 30:45

Scripture: 1 Peter 3:21

Topics: "Baptism"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the power of God's spirit and how it produces disproportionate responses that defy human logic. The outcome of God's work is beyond human understanding and natural abilities. The sermon focuses on the importance of baptism and how it signifies a new birth and a call to live a new life. The speaker uses the metaphor of walking to describe the ongoing journey of living out one's baptism. The sermon also highlights the concept of God doing everything and humans having a role to play in response to God's work.

Transcript

This is Church of the Resurrection in Whedon, Illinois. This week's sermon is by Bishop Stuart Ruch and is part three of our Fully Sacramental series. Seven years ago, our youngest son was born.

Some of you that were here that may remember, he was born on February 2nd, which was the last great Chicago blizzard. He was born in the middle of the blizzard. It was a very, very difficult labor and delivery for Catherine.

It ended up being an emergency C-section. Due to that surgical procedure, that meant that once Beckett was born, Catherine was still in post-op processes and they actually brought him to me. I was there in the nursery of the hospital.

That was the first time I'd ever had that experience, and I was a little taken aback when here came Beckett and Catherine wasn't there. The nurse handed him to me, and I'd been waiting for him. I already, of course, deeply loved him, but now we were able to bond father-son.

We were able to be together and to be close. It was one of the more remarkable two hours of closeness in my entire life. So I sat there.

I held Beckett. I kind of carried him like this. He was quite content at that point.

I talked to him. I nuzzled him. And then Catherine was brought up, and she was able to care for him and feed him.

I want to start with that picture. I want to put that picture in your imagination as I begin and as I teach on baptism this morning. Because I want you to associate baptism with closeness, and I want you to associate baptism especially with closeness to Jesus.

That what baptism ministers, and I'm going to personify baptism by using that word ministers. We all minister Jesus. None of us are clearly Jesus, yet we all minister Jesus.

We bring Jesus's presence. Jesus works through us. So too in baptism.

Baptism ministers closeness to Jesus. It ministers closeness to Jesus's death, which is extremely important for the human person. It ministers closeness to Jesus's resurrection, which is to say his life.

And baptism ministers to our whole person, our bodies and our hearts, this closeness to Jesus. We're going to work out of the Bible and study the Bible. We're going to work in Romans chapter 6 primarily.

So if you have a Bible with you, you can turn to Romans chapter 6. If you don't have a Bible, we have many, many Bibles that you can just go back there and grab one and borrow one. If you're using one of our church Bibles, Romans chapter 6 is on page 942. We'll primarily be in there, but we're also going to look at another passage of Scripture.

And if you want to tear a little thing out of your bulletin and make a marker for yourself, we'll also be in 1 Peter chapter 3, verse 21 especially, which again in our church Bibles is at page 1016. Also, just to clarify, we're working through our church values, what we call our five S's. Our five S's come out of Acts chapter 2, fully scriptural, fully sacramental, full of the Spirit, free to sacrifice our lives for Jesus, focused on the salvation of others.

So we're working these through. And the reason we are so fully sacramental to the resurrection is because we are so fully scriptural. And we did a four-part series in January on being fully scriptural, and I would encourage you to listen to that, which sets the foundation, therefore, for why we're so fully sacramental.

Because we believe it is deeply biblical. More on that coming up. Baptism brings Jesus' death close.

Look at verses 2 and 3 of Romans chapter 6 with me. How can we who died to sin still live in it? Paul continues, Okay. Many of you, I'm sure, associate baptism in some way with water.

And that's a proper association. The meaning of the original word, though, is actually immersion, which gives us the idea of water, of course. But when you hear baptism, you need to hear immersion, hear soaked, hear, to use a current vernacular phrase, all in.

All right? So there's an all-in quality to baptism. There's an immersion. There's a soaking in baptism.

And what you're being soaked in is the power of Jesus' death. His life has incredible power. We'll get to that.

But so, too, does His death. And that's the teaching of the way of Jesus, which, for some of you, is very unfamiliar, I understand. And it doesn't make sense right away, I understand.

But what's very important to understand is that for us as Christians, we have a cross in the middle of our church, which is a replica of what was once an instrument of execution. We're very intentional about that. Many of us wear crosses because we are very connected to the death of Jesus.

Why? Because the death of Jesus frees us from the death of sin. To get the cross, to get the death of Jesus, you have to understand how profound the death of sin is. Sin is not a problem.

Sin is not simply a perplexity to be considered and figured out. It is those things. But we must understand that sin is more than a trauma.

Sin is catastrophic. Sin can only be understood by the writers of the Bible as death. It's that total in terms of what's happened to the human person and the human person's ability to live in joy, to live in freedom, to live selflessly.

Sin has killed that in us in that we live apart from God, who is life. So it's actually very logical if God is life, which is the teaching of the Bible, and we live apart from the God who is life, we then live in death, which is to say we live in sin. So the only way, even more than a rescue, even more than a correction, is there has to be a new birth out of our death.

So we're using primal understandings of death, birth, to get close to who we are, who Jesus is making us to be, who we were originally meant to be when we were created. So if you can understand that and the depth of death and the reality of sin, that it can't be corrected, it must be utterly, completely overcome. Death must be killed by the death of Jesus himself.

And that death, which frees us, which gives us a new birth, is called being born again or being born from above. That's a new birth. It's a new birth in Jesus.

We're given a new beginning in Jesus. And the waters of baptism minister that to us. They pour that out upon us in a deeply tangible, deeply lived way that has to do with the heart and has to do with the body.

How can we even begin to understand this? So at one level, what we need to be clear about when it comes to baptism, when it comes to the salvation of God in Christ, is that God does everything, we do something. God does everything, we do something. Chaplain Tim Blackman was talking to me about a word he's been studying.

The word is not an easy word, but it's an important one, and I'm going to teach it to you. I don't expect you to go, when I use the word, you go, OK, got it. The word is incommensurable.

Incommensurable. He's using mathematics, he's using sciences. Incommensurable.

One way to define incommensurable is this. That which is impossible to measure or compare. It's impossible to measure or compare what God has done through Jesus and then what we do.

It's not comparable. It's incommensurable. Incommensurable is whether it lacks a common quality on which to make a comparison.

Quoting Delos Willard, who writes on incommensurability, Christian philosopher, late 20th century, Dr. Willard says this, The outcome of God's work is beyond human logic to understand or natural powers to accomplish. God does everything. We do something.

What's our something? Because it's very important there is a something in baptism. Paul describes the something, verse 4, we too might walk in newness of life. So you're given a new birth, but you're also then called to live a newness of life.

Baptism begins with a new birth, but it must continue with a newness of life. And the metaphor is walking. Paul's going to use it again.

I'll use it next week when I teach on confirmation. Walking. There has to be a walking out of baptism.

Whether it's infant baptism, which I will talk about, or whether it's believer's baptism. There must be a walking out. Or, Peter will talk about it as an appeal to God.

So what's the something? We love a series of books written by a man named Ralph Moody. And it's all about Ralph Moody growing up. They're true stories of growing up in America.

And one of the stories, though, that we don't love as a family is when Ralph Moody, age 17, goes to work on his grandfather's farm in Maine. And basically the grandfather is in his absolute dotage. I mean, he's not clear.

He's weak. He can't work anymore. He's incredibly cantankerous.

And he's absolutely unfair. So Ralph does all the work on the farm. He takes care of the cattle.

He repairs all the machinery. He does all the farming. He's doing everything with a couple of hired hands.

But his grandfather insists that he's doing everything. His grandfather says he's actually an incredible help to Ralph, when actually he makes Ralph's work so much more difficult. And his grandfather will never simply admit or say thank you to Ralph for what he's done.

And as the listener of the story, we listened to it on our family road trip, we were literally yelling at the little cassette player. Like, ah! Like, do something! You just wanted that grandfather to have this major epiphany. You wanted him to go, oh my word, Ralph, you're amazing.

You're doing everything. That's the something. That's the something.

What I wanted Ralph's grandfather to say, if somebody were watching your story with God, and they were listening to your story with God, and you were saying, God, I desperately need you. God, you do everything. God, I repent of thinking I couldn't do anything apart from you.

The listener of your story would be yelling at you going, repent! Stop thinking you can live a life apart from God's life. Stop thinking that you can somehow in your own death make life. They'd be yelling at you, do something! Just be thankful for all that Jesus has done for you.

That's the something. We bring repentance. We bring faith.

Which is to say, openness to God. Desire for God's life. Faith is desire for the life of God.

And realize that we'll never have life on ourselves. Which is to say, baptism not only brings Jesus' death close to us, and thereby cleanses us in the waters of baptism, but baptism brings Jesus' life to us. Water is cleansing.

Water is also known as living water. Which in the Bible, when the Holy Spirit is ministering, is often described as living water. So there's a spirit empowerment to walk in newness of life.

To take the new birth that's given to us in baptism, and thereby to walk it out in the resurrection power of Jesus. To receive that through Jesus, from Jesus, in the waters of baptism. My hope today for you, this is what I want you to get out of this teaching, is that if you're not baptized, that you will repent of your sins and receive Jesus as Lord, and become obsessed with being baptized.

That you will send us daily emails, would you please baptize me? I believe in Jesus and repent. That's something I hope for from this sermon. If you've already been baptized, I hope you'll just go, thank God I'm baptized.

I want to renew my baptism. I want to live in my baptism. That's my something.

I just want to be in baptism. Whenever somebody gets baptized in that font, and they're getting super wet and super immersed, I'm going to celebrate my baptism. Which is what we do as a church.

We go around and sprinkle you with water. That's not just a weird moment. That's a renewing of your baptism.

Right, because some of you experience it as a weird moment. I know, it's unusual. But it's renewing your baptism.

This new birth, leading to new life, and the resurrection, it comes close to us. Which is why after you're baptized, if the bishop is present, the bishop anoints you with oil, and by the way, he's going to anoint you with oil to get your confirmation. They're connected.

That moment's connected. The bishop anoints you with oil, and he says, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism. You're given the power of the Holy Spirit.

The resurrection life of Jesus himself in baptism. And you're marked as Christ's own forever. Because God marks his people.

He marked the Israelites with circumcision. With a way to live their lives, he marked them. And he marks us now with baptism.

So baptism brings Jesus's death close. It brings Jesus's life close. Some of you were able to be part of our holy services.

Some of you weren't. You're newer to Rez, or you were traveling, you weren't able to be here. But what happens in Holy Week is the resurrection life of Jesus being given to us.

There's a renewing, spiritually speaking, of our baptisms. One way that that happened this Holy Week is there was a call for those who want to serve Jesus out of closeness to Jesus. And we made that call, and we said, folks, come up to the altar.

There's the symbol of God's presence and power, and we want to anoint you for service. And hundreds of you, I was completely surprised. It was beautiful.

Hundreds of you came out to receive prayer that you may serve Jesus in new life. Another point we said, those of you who just struggle constantly with fear, maybe two dozen different types of fear, we don't know, but if fear is keeping you from living a resurrection power life, come over here. I want us to pray for three or four dozen of you who said, I want to walk in newness of life, free from fear, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

That was baptism work that we were doing. We were helping you renew your baptism there. Okay.

It brings death of Jesus close, which brings new birth. It brings life, the resurrection life of Jesus, which gives us power. And it brings our bodies and our hearts close to Jesus.

Okay. This is the most intricate part, and I need you to, I feel like you're with me. Just stay with me here.

Okay. Let's go over to 1 Peter. All right.

So that's 1 Peter chapter three. And this is a scriptural teaching that some folks just don't know is in the Bible. You may be learning your Bible still, or you may be acting like you know your Bible better than you do.

That would not make you alone. And maybe that you're brand new to the Bible. So it's very important you understand this teaching.

This is a teaching from Peter, and what he's going to do is he's going to talk about baptism connected to the Israelite people and the Hebrew scriptures. Paul also does this. Kenneth even mentioned this in 1 Corinthians chapter 10.

Paul does this, connects baptism and holy communion with the Israelites. So this is not an uncommon thing. This is how the apostolic teachers thought.

So Peter's saying, 1 Peter chapter three, he talks about the work of the ark of Noah. God's patience waited in the days of Noah. This is verse 20.

While the ark was being prepared in which a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through water. Okay, so there was this water thing that happened, and God used water to bring them safely through. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you.

That is what Peter's saying, by the way. Now, we need to get all of Peter. We don't have all of Peter quite yet, but I want to stop there because I want that emphasized.

I would like that to hang there for you as a pupil of the Bible. Baptism, which now saves you. This is not an isolated verse.

Jesus talks about we come into the kingdom of God by water and the Spirit. Referring to baptism, John chapter three. Paul talked about this in the book of Titus as well.

And the new birth ministry of baptism. Who is the you? Baptism now saves you. The you is your whole person.

Your body, your mind. Jesus wants everything. We love the Lord our God with all our bodies, souls, strength.

Kenneth Stephen just proclaimed that at the beginning of the service today. It's the whole person he wants to save. Baptism.

What is this baptism? It's a tangible, profoundly concrete, lived sensory experience. It's a sacramental experience. When I say sacrament, what I'm saying is matter matters to God.

That God uses matter to minister himself to us. And it becomes very pitched and very real when we say that baptism is used by God to minister himself. He works through matter to serve us, to love us, to pour out upon us.

Now if that's a bit scandalous for you, you're probably listening to me well. What? How? Baptism has that kind of power? No, not in itself. Baptism doesn't have power in itself.

And Peter's not saying that. He says what? Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He isn't contingent upon the power of God himself.

The resurrection of Jesus. We're saying exactly what Paul's saying in Romans chapter 6. But it comes in and through baptism. And there's an element to that where we go, whoa, wait a second.

Because Stuart, I've been around here a little bit and you baptize babies in there. I've actually seen you immerse babies. By the way, that's not involuntary.

The parents request that we immerse their babies. Right? But I've seen you do this. I've seen you baptize babies in there.

Right. Absolutely. Okay, stay with me.

If God works through matter to minister his presence to us and his person to us, and he works through water, he works through bread and wine, all those things must be grounded in something even greater, which is that God has met us and the material reality of the word become flesh. If we aren't properly gospel scandalized by water baptism and infant baptism, it may be that that's because it's connecting us to a proper gospel scandal that God became man and dwelt among us. If I'm willing to accept that profound, supernatural, stunning, miraculous truth that God became flesh, I would challenge us, Oh, and God uses water and bread and wine.

It's rooted there. Not in the thing itself, but in the way that God is moving in and through. There must be a way for us to embrace this understanding without thinking that it's the thing itself and that somehow just by being baptized, everyone is saved.

If that was the case, we'd sell this building, we'd buy 20 fire engines, we'd bless that water, and I can guarantee you I would immerse everyone I possibly could in the city of Wheaton. And I really would. I really would because I want to see folks get saved.

But I also can't say that when you're baptized, you're just bearing witness yourself to the fact that you believe in God. No, God believed in you first. God loved you first.

God chose you first. Now there is a witness that's happening, but there's something more happening. God is ministering to you like he ministered to you through the incarnation, like he ministered to us through bread and wine.

God is meeting you. He's pouring out his grace and his love and his death and his resurrection in you. We also can't make this minimal.

We can't make this too little. We can't make this too natural. It has to have the super natural.

That's extremely important. When people are being baptized there, you are present at a miracle of God. God breaking in.

God saying death doesn't have the last word. God also saying, now go and live a new life. Okay, so how does infant baptism minister closeness to us? And I think there's some challenges that infant baptism presents to us.

I think it's supposed to challenge us. Now, I'm doing a little bit on this. I'm doing something.

You'll get everything in confirmation class, okay? So that's, I want to be clear. If you have a lot of questions around this, we will answer your questions and go into detail on infant baptism. But I have to connect it because I understand what's happening in infant baptism.

I think I understand what's happening in baptism. Okay, so here's what infant baptism challenges us with. First of all, infant baptism challenges us with just how incommensurable God's love is because that infant can't do anything.

Beckett didn't say to me, hey, Dad, I was just born. It was a really rough operation. Could you hold me for two hours? Right, he couldn't do that.

He didn't have the rational ability yet. That dynamic was incommensurable between Beckett and me. I'm holding him.

I'm caring for him. I'm talking to him. I've got rational ability.

I understand what's just happened. He's bonding. He's connected.

He has a spirit. He has a heart. He has a body.

He's there. He's totally present. He's a person.

A person prior to his birth and a person after his birth. But it's incommensurable. So the grace of God is scandalously incommensurable.

He does everything. We do something. Now that said, while an infant may not bring faith like we understand rational faith, that infant is bonded to the faith of their parents.

They belong to their parents who belong to Jesus. They're being brought to a church where there is faith. And we are absolutely insistent in our diocese and in our church, infants are not baptized without the faith of their parents being present.

We meet with every family that baptizes an infant. Faith must be there. It must be present in the household.

But we don't believe that faith is purely an individual reality. Indeed we would say faith is part of a household. It's part of a church.

There's an incommensurability. And that, if you see infant baptism happen and you're like, whoa, wow. That's not altogether a bad response.

If you're also going, whoa, wow, the incarnation. Two, infant baptism shows God's love for the human person that is pre-rational or a-rational. Now, rationality is important.

Thank God to be able to use our minds. It's very important as we walk in a new life that we grow in our rational ability to understand Christianity, to understand the Bible. That's why Christianity has been dedicated to developing schools and places of higher education and scholarship for centuries.

This isn't to put aside the rational, but this is to say that what we see in infant baptism is God's incredible love not just for us in our rationality but for the human person who at different seasons in life or in some cases with people with special needs or disabilities may be a-rational in some capacity. Does that mean that somebody pre-rational or a-rational can't come close to Jesus? I don't think the Bible teaches that at all. I think the Bible teaches that God's love is being poured out upon us in a scandalous, incommensurate way.

And He's drawing people to Himself. And He loves all people that He would draw to Himself. There's a reason why Jesus said in Matthew chapter 18, that scripture verse that's there in your sermon notes, He says, Let the children come to Me.

And then later He uses the word infant. Let the infants come to Me. It's a specific Greek word.

Let the infants come to Me. He puts His hands on them. He says, For to such of these belongs the kingdom of God.

I'm putting my hands on them. I'm bringing them into the kingdom of God as their parents bring them to Me. John Calvin, Reformed theologian, 16th century, in reflecting on Matthew chapter 19, which was core to his thinking on why absolutely infants should be baptized, says this, Jesus makes these infants partakers in Himself.

Jesus does it. They're brought by their parents. God has a deep, deep love for the whole person.

If you're raising a special needs child or a special needs adult, I hope you hear this right now. They're a person. If you interact with special needs folks throughout your work week or life, they're a person.

And Jesus wants to draw them close like He wants to draw you close. And they have things not only to receive, but to also give. This is extremely important to how followers of Jesus think and live.

Finally, Jesus challenges us, and infant baptism challenges us with the sacramental power of the family. Let me be very clear. I'm not saying that the family is a sacrament like baptism is a sacrament or Eucharist is a sacrament.

I'm not saying that everyone will marry and have families. There's a deep, rich Christian tradition of celibacy. I'm not saying that.

What I'm saying is that infant baptism speaks to the sacramental nature of the family insofar as God not only works through water, bread, wine. He works through the family. He works through mother and father.

He'll work through a single-parent family when that's happened in different cases. He'll work through others who may adopt children into a family. But He ministers and reaches through the family.

So when a family brings a child, this isn't perfunctory. This is recognizing that God is working through that family. As I said, it's about belonging.

Becket was given to us. He belongs to Catherine and me. And yet, much more than that, he belongs to Jesus.

So why would we not bring him to Jesus since we live in Jesus? Why would we not bring him to Jesus as soon as we possibly can? And why would we not raise him understanding he belongs to the Lord Jesus? I mean, is anybody really who followed Jesus raised? They're a four-year-old? Well, sometimes four-year-olds will give you pause without that they belong to Jesus. But, right, really? Like, oh, no, you're not. You don't belong to Jesus yet.

That would be a deep confusion of Jesus who says, let the infants come to me. For to such of these belongs the kingdom of God. Infant baptism ministers the closeness of Jesus, even the scandal of how Jesus comes close to us in and through those waters of baptism by his resurrection, by his death.

Now, Becket's been born. He's now seven. So now Becket's learning how to walk the new life in Jesus.

It's like in his baptism, I think Kenneth Stephen Ferguson was a trust fund baby. I've often talked about it like an inheritance. In baptism, whenever you were baptized, at whatever age you were baptized, you were given the inheritance of the gospel.

Full inheritance, you were given it. But you must then choose how you will invest the inheritance of the gospel, how you will spend the inheritance of the gospel. There must be fruit that is born from that.

And that's why confirmation and the ministry of confirmation, the ministry of the Holy Spirit in confirmation is so essential and part of baptism. And I'll do that next week. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.

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