

Baptism signifies new life.

The most unusual baptism I've ever shared in started with a phone call from Bob Shelley, who worked as a volunteer chaplains' aide at Park Ridge Hospital in Fletcher, North Carolina, when I served Trinity Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville in the spring of 2001.

There was an elderly gentleman who was a patient there, Johnny Jackson by name, a humble guy who had smoked a few packs of cigarettes a day for 50 years, clearly dying of lung cancer. His family gathered by his side - wife, children, and grandchildren; the waiting had begun. He had one last request: to be baptized. His story was, as he told me, even though he had been a groundskeeper at The Cove, where Billy Graham for years has had his residence, and he went to church faithfully, and believed fervently in Jesus as his Lord and Savior, he had never been baptized. His family confirmed all of that. Johnny's parents weren't church going folk-and he came to his own faith on his own accord. He knew he should have asked to be baptized all along, so now, he decided- it was better late than never. As I heard him tell his story, between fits of coughing & wheezing, I wasn't going to argue at all. I'd never done a deathbed baptism before, but there seems to be a first time for most everything. So I called up our Clerk of Session, told her about it- got her enthusiastic OK, & headed off to the hospital.

Now, Park Ridge is a Seventh Day Adventist Hospital, which means that they affirm only believer's baptism, by immersion.

They have a very caring & loving staff there- but still, they do not make exceptions to this rule, and if an on-staff chaplain were to baptize Johnny Jackson, they'd have to put him in some sort of gurney and lower him into a tank, something clearly against Doctor's orders. This is why I was called in; to surreptitiously administer the sacrament.

It went rather uneventfully, actually - with the family gathered around and behind me, so the doctors & nurses wouldn't see what I was doing. I had just a small vial of water to use, just enough to get his forehead wet. Johnny said yes to all the questions, I baptized him in the name of the Father, the Son & the Holy Spirit and soon departed, mission accomplished.

The next thing I expected to hear about Johnny was that I'd be called to do his funeral... but that wasn't the case, at least right away. Bob Shelley called me again to say that Johnny had made a recovery & had been discharged, and would I make a visit with them at their home.

Sure I would! So I went to the trailer park, visited with Johnny, his wife & three grandkids who lived with them, & arranged for his wife to be baptized at our early service in the next few weeks. Then I didn't hear from them for a long time- at least a few months, when Bob Shelly told me that Johnny had in fact died, having made peace with himself & God & having had a full church burial at the Apostolic Baptist Church in Fletcher.

Baptism signifies life, and it imparts life in ways we cannot fully imagine and do not fully know. As one of the early church Fathers of the mid-300's, Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, once wrote about the nature of baptism: "Jesus, who leads us to the sacrament, is not a blind guide leading the blind, he is a seeing guide leading the blurred."

Baptism leads us where we can never yet see, infuses us with life, and gives us the assurance that God is always with us.

Even beyond celebrating the gift of life, there is always a renewing element in baptism, even in just remembering it, whether we were infants, teenagers or adults when we were baptized. In the early church Baptism was often a much bigger celebration than how we usually do it. Pre-baptismal classes for new Christian believers began on the first day of Lent, with the celebration at the font often at an Easter vigil service, sometimes with immersion taking place three times; the holy number. Even in the earliest centuries, infants were baptized as well as adults, as part of the covenant community. In Russian Orthodox Churches today you can sometimes see how they did it in centuries before, with an infant- in his or her baptismal robe, who was dunked, or dipped through a very large font, symbolizing our dying in Christ & rising again in new life in the Lord ... It can be dramatic & always guarantees a good, healthy cry!

There's always something of what Jesus said present in the sacrament of baptism, that in order to save your life- you need to lose it. And just as Jesus submitted willingly to John, to have this done for him- there are times in our lives when we simply need to humble ourselves, let go of whatever pride we may have that holds us back, and allow ourselves to be part of a larger plan, surrendering our control over to God's good purposes.

But, it's always much easier said than done, isn't it?

So, these are the basics about baptism: it's about life, covenant, belief, promises and submission.

But there's a reason I've been thinking about baptism differently- and a lot more often over the past few weeks than usual this time of year ... for though Jesus' baptism is recognized as often as Christmas, it's obviously not celebrated the same way.

Over the past weeks I've caught myself thinking about last May 13 - anyone remember what happened then? It was Mother's Day, Confirmation Sunday - and Abby & Matt Young were baptized. I honestly don't remember much of a conversation we had about it: Jenn talked with Matt about it, who was in confirmation class at the time, but Abby just decided to go along for the ride. And I think if I'd have tried to have a conversation with her about it, she likely wouldn't have known quite what to say. If I would have asked her, 'why you - why now?' she probably would have said, "I don't know." Which is perfectly fine.

We don't always know the stirrings of the Spirit of God. The Gospel writer John says that you do not know where the Spirit comes from or where it goes, you hear the sound of it and you say "wow!" It's wind, and you didn't see it, but you felt it. There's a tree, standing straight & tall & proud, and then you see that tree go right over, bending & touching it's branches to the ground, and you say "What in the world?" It is the wind. You didn't see the wind, but you saw the tree bend. I once watched a sailboat out on a lake, just hanging out there, rocking, derelict- with its sails hanging limp like they were dead. Suddenly the sails filled and the boat began to knife its way through the water, and I said, "What was that?"

You say it was the wind. Did you see the wind? How do you know? Well, just have a look.

The events of early December, the fire, the loss, the grief, the service we had, I honestly believe laid bare who and what we are as a congregation - a people firmly rooted in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and a gathering of believers who are ready and able to support one another in need. Underneath us all, and mostly invisible amongst us, like an underground stream, like the wind that blows, is the presence of the Holy Spirit - who lights upon us like a Dove, unpredictably, suddenly, quietly - swiftly, and then is gone, or so it appears...

We have been touched by those events of early December; deeply and very changed. We are clearly not the same church we were this time last year. This Church, this congregation will never be the same again, (at least I know that I will never be the same again!).

We are not seen the same way any more by the community that surrounds us, and we don't see ourselves the same way, either. We are a church family now known as that church who did so much for a family in need - and rightfully so. (And I'm so thankful for all the caring & support offered by each & every one of you.) We are a congregation of support, solace, and deep joy in the gifts Christ has given us.

And in a different arena, we as a congregation have offered more resources in our Capital Campaign than I think anyone ever imagined, and we now have more work to do ahead to be good stewards of it than we are presently aware.

In many ways' we've been baptized anew in the events of this last year, in that we have a new foundation to build upon - even literally, continuing to feel God's Spirit with us, remembering God's love bestowed upon us at our baptisms, newly charged with energy, imagination and love to make real God's greatest promises in our midst, and just as far as God's vision can take us ... We didn't have a clue we'd be here - but here we are ... and God is with us ...

Thanks be to God.

Amen.