

## An Act that Tells a Story

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Scriptures: Genesis 12:1–9, Psalm 33:12–21, Romans 4:1–17, John 3:1-16

My grandmother passed away in 2003, when I was in the 9th grade. I never knew my grandfather, who passed away a couple of years before I was born. So when grandma died, that left my dad and his only brother, now adult children without their parents, to deal with my grandparents' combined estate.

Thankfully, there were no real controversies surrounding the settling of grandma's affairs, well except for the ketchup bottle. That's right, the only item in my grandmother's possession that I heard one peep about both sons wanting was this ugly, old ketchup bottle.

And so my dad and my uncle came up with a brilliant solution - split custody of the ketchup bottle, one year at a time, a gift from one family to the other at Christmas. Before this tradition ran its course, there were several wonderful transfers of the bottle, usually accompanied by a newly composed musical number or convoluted scavenger hunt ending in the bottle's discovery.

And so, leached chemicals from old plastic reused far too many times notwithstanding, we honored my grandma in this way, getting a good laugh along the way.

This action, silly as it was, told a story. It told a story of memories from the childhood home, the dinner table of my dad and uncle, my grandma and grandpa. It told a story of my grandparents, who, growing up in the Great Depression, held onto things perhaps a little longer than necessary. It told a new story of two brothers and their families, mourning the loss of the prior generation in their own way, a way that affirmed their love of not only those who had gone before, but those who were still here. In short, this ketchup bottle ceremony told the story of my family.

There is another action that tells a story, an action we heard repeated over and over in our New Testament reading, an action that we may not be super comfortable talking about out loud, circumcision. That's right, it's okay to say the word. I can tell that this subject can make us uncomfortable because there is an option in the lectionary to skip over the circumcision section of Romans 4, and if our theme were different, perhaps we would have done that today, but these verses are important. Circumcision was an important part of the story of Abraham, the story of the people of Israel's identity. It was the physical sign, the action that took place that signified God's covenant with his

people. It was a way of God marking his people, at least the males, as his own.

This is the story into which Jesus is born. But Jesus comes to make things new. He declares a kingdom that has a different entry point than circumcision. What does he say to Nicodemus in our Gospel reading? “Unless one is born again, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.” When Nicodemus thinks about this waaaay too literally, Jesus clarifies, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.”

Jesus introduces a new way, a new action, that is not simply an action, it tells a story. He is pointing of course to baptism, the very thing, the very sacrament that he would later command his disciples to bring to the ends of the earth. In our service of baptism, we of course have the water, but we also anoint those who are baptized, sealing them as a sign that they are receiving the Holy Spirit. Water and spirit, just like Jesus said.

But it gets even better than that. Not only is this new sign obedience to the commands and teachings of Jesus, God himself, the bounds of who can receive that sign of God's kingdom have been expanded to all. Baptism is a lot more inclusive than circumcision. Of course, this is borne out in the Gentiles, those who didn't practice circumcision, being welcomed into the Kingdom. This is a major issue Paul is

dealing with in Romans and we will get to that in a moment. But it is also worth noting how baptism includes all of God's image-bearers, sons of Adam AND daughters of Eve. Israel's practice of circumcision was for males only. The kingdom markings of baptism are for all people, male and female image bearers of God.

And the news gets better still. Throughout the practice of circumcision by God's people, God's presence resided in a specific place - Mt. Sinai, the Tabernacle, the Temple. But in Jesus, God's presence is with us. Remember what happened in the crucifixion: the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies, the place where God's presence, God's spirit, dwelled, was torn in two. The division was no longer, paving the way for Pentecost and God's presence with his people wherever they are. We confess baptism as a sacrament, meaning that God is present in the action. And so baptism surpasses circumcision in this way as well. It is not simple obedience, but a place of God meeting us.

This is what we remember every Easter when we re-commit to our baptismal vows, it is what we remember every time we dip our fingers in the font at the back of the Nave and make the sign of the cross upon our bodies. It's an action that tells a story, the good story of the life we live by faith in Christ, the story of the sacrament.

What does the sacrament of baptism say about us? What sort of story does this act tell? I want to answer this question from three angles this

morning, from the perspective of sacrament and memory (looking backwards), sacrament and identity (looking at the here and now), and finally, sacrament and calling (looking at what is next). Using our passages from Genesis and Romans, we can see how this story that the sacrament tells is one that is grounded in and calls us toward faith in the Triune God.

### **Sacrament and memory (past)**

In his commentary on the book of Genesis, Allen Ross makes the comment that the Abraham story would be one that the people of Israel would look back to throughout their history, in good times such as the coming into Canaan and the building of the Temple, and in bad times such as slavery in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> Throughout Israel's history, God refers to himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is not simply so that God can be distinguished from the other false deities of the Ancient Near East. In referring to himself in this way, God ties himself to a particular story, a personal story, a story that begins with Abraham walking out in faith, believing that God would deliver on the things (land and descendants) that he had promised him. The continuing practice of circumcision was a way of linking back to that same story, that same faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, Allen. *Genesis Cornerstone Commentary*, Gen 11:27-12:9.

Baptism, too, links us to our fathers and mothers in the faith, indeed, all the way back to the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah. God remains the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their stories ought to still inspire the sort of faith that they displayed. When we read that Abraham set out on his own, to become a stranger in a strange land, depending only on the word that he had heard from the Lord, we see what our own story could be as well.

But the cloud of witnesses has grown even greater for us. One of the gifts of our church calendar is the minor feast days for the various saints from Christian history. There are collects for these days, remembering these saints whose stories we may not even know. But the collects teach us all the same. On days of martyrs, the collects ask that we be given courage to proclaim the gospel with boldness. On days of saints who were known for serving the poor, we pray for a detachment from earthly things for the sake of others. Baptism ties our story to the stories of these great saints, so that we may be encouraged and empowered to live a faith-filled life such as theirs.

Our baptism is our entrance into the story of God's people, a story that was going a long time before we came along. If we can remember that story, if we can remember the faith of those who have gone before us, we can be prepared to walk boldly in our own faith.

**Sacrament and identity (now)**

The sacrament of baptism gives us a new identity, not simply as an image bearer of God, as all people are, but as his beloved son or daughter. That's why we forsake other identities on our baptism, identities determined by the world, the devil, or even by our flesh and desires.

But looking at our passage today from Romans 4, there is a particular facet of our baptismal identity I would like to highlight. Our baptism makes us a part of a community of believers centered on faith. You may have noticed that our common confession, the Nicene Creed, is always said in the plural. Not "I believe," but "We believe." Personal beliefs are important, and the Apostles Creed reflects that well, but we are a corporate body of believers. We believe together, we come to the Table together. Our baptism ties us to the family of faith.

This of course can make things difficult. And I think that is part of the reason why Paul talks about circumcision so much. John Scott argues that this passage at the beginning of Romans 4 has a message for both the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome and I think he's right. That message is that they are united now in their baptism, regardless of their cultural background. The Jewish Christian has to realize that the Gentiles are welcome on account of their faith, and not their ethnic identity or practices and the Gentile Christian needs to understand

that he or she is entering into a story that began and continued for centuries through God's chosen people of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Paul puts it this way: "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring — not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all." The people who once were of one two, three, many nations, are now united by faith. That's what the sacrament of baptism does!

So when we are divided from our brothers and sisters in the faith, it is not supposed to be that way! Conflict and disagreement, these are things that are unavoidable on this side of God's New Creation, but unity in Christ, unity in faith is an essential part of our baptismal identity.

### **Sacrament and calling (what's next)**

Commentator Joyce Baldwin ties the Abraham story and specifically his call to leave the company of his father's family and pursue the land and descendants that God promises to him, to the calling of the disciples by Jesus.<sup>3</sup> I love that comparison of Abraham leaving the herds of his father being linked to Peter, James, and John leaving their fishing nets behind. Think about all the wonderful and beautiful and

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<sup>2</sup> Scott, John *The Message of Romans*, Rom 4:1-25

<sup>3</sup> Baldwin, Joyce. *The Message of Genesis 12-50*, 30.



scary things the disciples didn't know when they followed Jesus. And yet they followed him. To be called by God is often to be called to leave the comfort of the known and venture into the unknown. And so being marked by God in baptism is not just a call to remember the faithfulness of those who came before. It's not just a call to join in unity with those who share the same faith in the here and now, but it is a calling to leave behind the safety and security of the known and follow after God wherever he may lead.

This is also the story that baptism tells. In baptism, we make vows to follow Christ as Lord, to obey the Scriptures and to walk in them. Vows and oaths are future-oriented promises. Marriage vows are not simply a declaration of feelings in the moment, but of commitments to future actions. An oath of service to one's country or city is about what you will do in the future to serve those entities. The sacrament of baptism, in the same way, is not simply a declaration of the current state of one's soul, but a commitment to the direction that soul will walk in.

### **All together now**

The sacraments are timeless, that is one of the beautiful ways that they teach us about God. They encompass past present and future. In our communion liturgy, we say as much when we proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died, a declaration of what has happened,

Christ is risen, a current reality, Christ will come again, a hope for the future.

Baptism is timeless in a similar way. It connects us by faith those that have come before us, those who share the faith today, and to the calling that God has in front of us.

As we heard I'm the Exhortation last week, Lent was traditionally a time in the life of the Church where those who were seeking baptism prepared to receive that sacrament on Easter through fasting, prayer, and learning. And for those of us who are considering baptism this morning and those of us who are preparing to renew our baptismal vows on Easter Sunday, it is important to remember the story that baptism, our new birth tells. Ultimately, it is a story of faith, not just our faith, but the faithfulness of the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.