

SERMON OF DR. STEVEN P. EASON

“Your Baptism Story”

January 7, 2018

A Psalm of David. Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor. The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, ‘Glory!’ The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king for ever. May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Psalm 29

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Mark 1:4-11

Why Jesus was baptized? If he was the Son of God, there would be no sin to wash away. Seems he wouldn’t need to be baptized, but maybe he did. How many times do you think Jesus remembered those words, “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*”(1:11b). He may have even remembered those words on the cross. Our baptisms are more than a ritual. They are more than “christening,” which means to name something. As a wedding is the beginning of a marriage, baptism is the beginning of a Christian life. Our lives are our baptism stories.

So what’s your baptism story? I was baptized on Sunday, January 3, 1955 in the Mt. Hermon Methodist Church in Creswell, North Carolina. That was 63 years ago! I was 5 months old. My father was a Methodist minister and he baptized me. My mother probably did all the work to get me there! All those people are now with the Lord, but I’m still here. Still baptized.

My life has come out of that baptismal font; the good, the bad and the ugly. There was nothing magical about the water or even the act itself. I don’t even remember it. It was the promises made.

My parents vowed to raise me in the faith. *(They did the best they could with what they had to work with!)* And the congregation vowed to nurture me along the journey. Every congregation I have ever belonged to has made an effort to keep that vow.

As a teenager I was confirmed. I took my vow to follow Christ, but in truth, they were only words. The real confirmation would come later. When I went off to college I thought I was beginning a new life, without my parent's supervision, without the church, without the old rules and regulations. But that wasn't the case. I was taking a course in astronomy. The professor gave extra credit if we attended Brecht's play on the *Life of Galileo*. I was a C student, at best, majoring in "Party!" *(And I'm not talking about political parties!)*

So I go to this play, not even knowing who Galileo was or what he did. I figured it had something to do with astronomy. (C students can figure out stuff like that!) And while I was watching that play I heard a voice from heaven. It wasn't an audible voice. It was an impressionable voice. *We are not the center of the universe.* Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? But think how different the world would be if everyone were to embrace this truth. *We are not the center of the universe.*

That epiphany woke me up. God is the center of all things. We are but "*a pale blue dot*" suspended in the universe, yet God would come to us in Christ? This was a remarkable revelation. What grace! What love! But here's the part that actually changed my life. We crucified him. Talk about thinking you are the center of the universe! It all began to make sense. And the most stunning of all was that God would raise Christ from the dead for us, and for our salvation. Unbelievable!

What if the whole world had this awareness? How could you pull a trigger or launch a missile? How could you feel superior to another race or people? How could you foster greed or pride? None of that can find a home in a life that is centered in God. Those things might visit, but they can't stay there. They wouldn't fit. If God is at the center of my life, nothing else can be at that center. That changes everything.

This passion drove me to Divinity School at Duke. I called my parents late one night from the Kappa Sig House at East Carolina to tell them I was going into the ministry. They didn't know anything about Galileo or anything else. When my dad answered the phone at that late hour, he said, "What's wrong? Are you in jail?" They were more than a little surprised! OK, shocked!

I was ordained a United Methodist, married Catherine and sent by the bishop to our first church in Moyock, North Carolina. *(Don't ask! It's near the Outer Banks, has one blinking light... that only works on Tuesdays!)*

After 3 years, I left that little church for a residency in pastoral counseling in Norfolk, Virginia. I was certified and worked as a therapist for seven years. During that time, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church came to the counseling center and asked if any of us could fill in part-time for one of his associates who took another call. I've been "*filling in*" ever since! That invitation led to a new call and transferring my ordination to the Presbyterian Church in 1984, and that led to a whole new world!

We served seven years in Norfolk, nine years in Morganton, NC, five years in Mt. Pleasant, SC and thirteen years at Myers Park in Charlotte. I did a year of consulting clergy and just finished 20

months as the interim pastor of First Church, Richmond, VA. Those are just the dates. There is no way I can tell the whole story of what happened from that baptism in 1955 to this moment. It's been incredible! Not all good, but through it all, there has never been a time when I was *unbaptized*. When would that time ever be?

Those of us who are baptized have a story. When you look back over your life, where do you see God's hand, God's nudging, God's providence and grace? That's *your* story. Every story is different. Every story is rich. Every story is valid. This church also has a story. We don't know who the next pastor of this church is going to be. But, guess what, they don't either! Somebody is somewhere today, and they have no idea that you will become a part of their baptism story. It'll come as a great surprise.

Little did the people of the Mt. Hermon Church know what they were starting back in January of 1955! That journey has brought us to *Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church* in Knoxville, Tennessee, in January of 2018! For that, we are grateful! As we begin this New Year together, let us remember our baptisms and God's calling and claim on our lives. If the past is any indication, whatever happens in the future will surely be exciting! Whatever happens next, we will surely be in God's hands!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Congregation; **Amen**

This transcript has not been read or edited by Dr. Steven P. Eason.