

GOD CLAIMS YOU

The story is told of a pastor's words to a baby shortly after he had baptized her. No doubt, the minister was speaking as much to the congregation as to the infant. "Little sister, by this act of baptism, we welcome you to a journey that will take your whole life. This isn't the end. It's the beginning of God's experiment with your life. What God will make of you, we know not. Where God will take you, surprise you, we cannot say. This we do know and this we say -- God is with **you.**" (William B. Kincaid, III, "And then Came the Angel", CSS Publishing Company)

What beautiful words! I wish that every now and then I would come up with words like that to say to people who are newly baptized...because that is exactly the message that baptism conveys.

Baptism is not a destination but a beginning of a journey of faith. Baptism is not about anything we do like coming to God, saying yes to joining a church, or even washing our sins away in the waters of baptism. Baptism is not about what we have done, what we have to do to be cleaned up first, or even how we come to the feet of Jesus. It is not about us.

Baptism is all about God claiming a person, renaming a person, and launching this person on a journey of holiness and righteousness following after Jesus as his disciple. As a church, we recognize that God has claimed this person their entire life. In infants, we realize that God claims this child from day one, and it is up to us as parents and as a congregation to help nurture this child's desire for God until that day when the child responds to God's claim on their life

in confirmation. In young people and adults, God has claimed this person from day one, and by grace been creating a desire in him or her to respond to God's claim upon their life.

Baptism is that sacred moment when God's claim is revealed, God's love is poured out like the heavens opening, and they hear the voice of God saying, "You are my beloved daughter, my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased."

Then in baptism, the candidate accepts that God has claimed them, God does love them, God is pleased with them as forgiven and reconciled people, and this person accepts that they are now a new creation launched into a brand new life that will never end. All of this is the sacrament of Baptism, a gift of God's grace, working inwardly through the Spirit to desire God, and outwardly

through water that demonstrates we are made new creations in Christ Jesus.

It is God's desire that every person in the world is baptized through water and the Spirit. Especially in this world of evil, people committing horrors beyond belief on one another, shattering dreams of children and adults as they are cut down by bullets in our community and in Arizona. We need more of the true message of God, the gospel message of God's claim upon each soul, not less of it.

We lessen the gospel message in this world when Christians bicker and fight with each other over politics, using the name of Jesus to make our point rather than listening to and sharing the good news of God's love. We lessen the gospel message when we shrink away from challenging the evil in our community and world with the

Word of God by withdrawing into our own circles of people that we know.

A big problem we have as Christians is that we put the light of Christ under a bowl when we don't show integrity in our life as baptized Christians and go and do something or say something that Christ would not do or say. For example, we log on to FaceBook and post things that we wouldn't tell our mother, or we send email or text lots of people with words and pictures of hate that others sent to us. We say things under our breath against others, we yell and scream as we drive our cars some words that should never be recorded and heard by others...in other words we lessen the gospel message in the world, we put the light of Christ under a bowl, and we go and do whatever we want to do thinking

that no one sees us, no one hears us, or no one reads the words we write or forward.

I want to tell you and me today that Christ does effect this world, that the Spirit of God is moving upon hearts, that God still desires that everyone be baptized by water and the Spirit...our choice today is do we flow with the water and the Holy Spirit, letting Christ take us places and getting involved with people we would rather not speak to...for the sole purpose of increasing the gospel message of God's claim on and love for every human life?

Or the other choice is to block the water of baptism and the Holy Spirit in us, to choose to live apart from God's grace given to us, to dam up the gospel message in us and turn away from the path of salvation, because we are afraid, or

we don't want that person to be seen with us, or we are comfortable right here.

You and I who are baptized Christians have been given a new life and a new name because we have heard and accepted God's claim upon us and we have chosen to follow Jesus. For six weeks, I have preached this sermon series on "Signs" to get us to recognize the fact that God has claimed us and we have responded to God's grace through the waters of baptism. For six weeks, I have preached that God loves you, that God wants to change you into something completely new and that through the Incarnation of Jesus we know what that looks like in the life of a human being, we have an example to follow. For six weeks, God has given these signs of grace culminating today with the ultimate signs of Sacraments in Baptism and Eucharist that

demonstrate the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ given to us. For most of us, these signs of God are familiar; we have seen them over and over. Yet in parts of our life as individuals and as a church, we throw up roadblocks to God, we divert God's message of grace and keep it to ourselves; we don't want anyone to realize that we are different and that we have good news to share with the world...except in times when being a Christian will stroke our ego and give us a good reputation.

Therefore, this entire year I will devote my preaching to messages of removing the roadblocks in our discipleship and in our church, to dismantle the dams that keep the gospel message from our community and from being seen and heard in us. This year, God is causing the Holy Spirit to be a mighty river to flow in us and through us washing away all

that keeps us from increasing the gospel message in a world of increasing violence, evil, greed, and death. The Holy Spirit will flood through our church leadership, through our congregation, and out into our community through prayer, worship, study of scripture, small group accountability, and works of love. You see, the water of baptism isn't a bowl in a wooden font...it is the mighty river of the water of life flooding the whole world through one person and one church at a time because God claims this world, God claims humanity, God claims this church and you and me, saying: You are my beloved, I made you, I love you...come and live in me and I in you.