

Today, I'd like to share with you a short teaching about the meaning and purpose of baptism.

If you've already been baptized as a follower of Jesus, I pray that you'll receive this as a fresh call from Jesus to live more fully and deeply into your baptized identity.

If you've not yet been baptized, I pray that you'll receive this teaching as a personal call from Jesus to follow him into the waters of baptism yourself, and into the kind of life that baptism represents.

Now at Cornerstone, our Mission Statement is:

Making space for Jesus to shape people together in God's love.

When you boil that down, it basically amounts to saying that Cornerstone exists to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We're all about discipleship.

What's a disciple? A disciple is someone who follows Jesus as Master. Discipleship can be defined as BEING with Jesus to LEARN from Jesus how to BECOME like Jesus.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus' final words to his followers before he ascended to heaven were:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...¹

So baptism is an essential part of making disciples of Jesus. It's also essential to being a disciple of Jesus—someone who follows Jesus as Master in every aspect of life.

Baptism, therefore, isn't some optional, "add-on" feature for those who happen to be extra-serious about their Christian faith. Rather, baptism is basic to our very identity as Christians. It's the most fundamental and vital step you can take in your journey of following Jesus.

At this time, I'd like to share three key dimensions of the meaning and purpose of baptism. There are many other dimensions to baptisms we could explore, but we'll stick to three today. For starters, baptism is:

1. A picture of rescue.

¹ Matthew 28:19a

At every baptism, we witness the drama of God's power to rescue people from sin, judgment, and death, and to give them new life, making them his very own people.

Baptism is a picture which reminds us of the rescuing power of God that we see throughout the Bible.

For example, in the book of Genesis, God brought Noah and his family safely in the ark through the flood waters of judgment, and into a new life.

In Exodus, God led the people of Israel through the miraculously parted waters of the Red Sea, out of a life of slavery to the Egyptians, and into a new life as his very own people.

Similarly, in the book of Joshua, God parted the Jordan River, and led his people through the water, out of the desolations of the desert, and into a new life in the Promised Land.

We also read of how God rescued a disobedient prophet named Jonah from drowning in the waters of a stormy sea by preserving him inside a great fish, and eventually depositing him onto dry land with new lease on life, and a renewed mission to tell others of God's mercy.

Did you realize all that these Old Testament stories point to baptism?

These stories formed the backdrop for the actions of John the Baptist, who at the outset of the New Testament was baptizing Jews in the waters of the Jordan River as a sign of repentance—of turning away from sin and to God—in order to prepare their hearts for the coming Messiah, Jesus, who would be their ultimate rescuer.

Jesus himself would be baptized by John—not because he needed to repent of sin, like you and I do— but as an example of obedience for us to follow, and more than that—as a pointer to the fact that Jesus would ultimately make it possible for us to be rescued from sin and death, through his crucifixion and resurrection on our behalf.

So that's one thing that's pictured in baptism— rescue. Rescue through the waters and into new life by a power not our own—God's power.

Now some of you might be thinking, "Hey, I don't need to be rescued. I can sort out my own problems and issues just fine, thank you very much." But when it comes right down to it, can you, really?

Do you always live up to the standards of your own conscience? I mean, who does? And if you don't even live up to the standards of your own conscience, do you really think that you'll be able to live up to the standards of an infinitely holy God by your own efforts at self-improvement?

You see, self-help is no help at all. As the Bible says in Romans:

For everyone has sinned. We all fall short of God's glorious standard.²

Which is precisely why you and I don't just need self-improvement. We need to be rescued, because no matter how hard we may try, we can never save ourselves from our sins.

And that's where the good news of Jesus comes in. Through Jesus, God offers to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. He rescues us!

Baptism is a picture of that. It's a dramatic re-enactment of how God, in his love for fallen sinners like you and me, sent his Son Jesus to die for our sins and to rise again from death, so that we can be forgiven—rescued— from sin, judgment, and death.

By being baptized today, each of our candidates is saying, I'm a sinner in need of a Saviour, and I'm saying yes, with my whole life, to what God is done for me in Jesus— who died, was buried, and rose again— for my rescue.

If baptism is a picture of rescue, then at the same time it's also:

2. A participation in Jesus' death and resurrection.

In baptism, you die with Jesus, and are raised with Jesus. It's a demonstration of how your old life— driven by sin and self— is dead and buried as you go down under that water— you're leaving your old life behind. And, as you come up out of that water, it's a sign that you've been raised to a brand-new life in Jesus,

As the Bible says in Romans 6:

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.³

We too may live a new life!

This doesn't mean that baptism is magic. It doesn't mean that when you come up out of the water, you'll never have any more problems. It doesn't mean that you'll instantly become like Jesus in character. That will take time and intentionality on your part, and a lifetime of grace from God. Nevertheless, baptism does mean that God has begun his work of masterpiece restoration in your life.

Because you are God's masterpiece, created in his image, to reflect his likeness and character. But sin has marred the image of God in all of us. Baptism is a sign that God is at work to restore his image in us, by shaping us to become more and more like Jesus.

² Romans 3:23 (NLT)

³ Romans 6:3-4 (NLT)

With baptism in mind, the Apostle Paul says in Colossians:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ [because baptism is a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus—so therefore]... put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.⁴

Baptism points to the fact that God's work of masterpiece restoration has begun in your life.

But what I want to especially emphasize today is that baptism is:

3. A declaration of identity.

Baptism is about who you are. Through baptism, your life becomes bound up with the life of Jesus Christ. So as a baptized disciple or follower of Jesus:

- You are not defined by your past.
- You are not defined by what other people think or say about you.
- You are not defined by your job.
- You are not defined by your wealth or social status.
- You are not defined by your achievements or grades.
- You are not defined by your family or culture of origin.
- You are not defined by your nationality, or political affiliation.

Rather, your identity is defined by who God says you are in Jesus Christ.

As a baptized disciple of Jesus, who does God say that I am? For starters, God says that **I am participant in God's Big Story.**

At one point in Tolkien's great epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, Samwise Gamgee says to his Hobbit friend Frodo, "I wonder what kind of tale we have fallen into?"

In asking this question, Sam assumes that there is a larger story; that there was something far greater going on than just their own personal stories. And he also assumes that somehow, their lives have been swept up into this grand, overarching story.

In Jesus Christ, the story of your life is not its own self-contained story. Rather, it is a vital sub-plot in God's Big Story (prompting question here). Baptism is a sign that your life has been swept up into the grand epic of Creation, Fall, Rescue, and Restoration that unfolds throughout the Bible's pages from Genesis to Revelation.

When you learn to see yourself as a participant in God's Big Story, your life starts to make sense in a way it never had before. As God helps you to discover the important part he has

⁴ Colossians 3:1, 10 (NIV)

given you to play in his Big Story, you come to know the joy of living for a purpose that is infinitely bigger than yourself, and your life becomes infused with incredible meaning.

Furthermore, in Jesus Christ, my very identity is marked by the fact that **I am member of God's family.**

In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, the Apostle Paul says:

For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body— whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free— and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.⁵

The labels that folks back in Jesus' day used to define the group or tribe they belonged to— labels like Jew or Gentile, slave or free—no longer mattered for those who had been baptized as followers of Christ. That's because in baptism, we become members of a new family—the church— also known as the “body” of Christ.

Just like the various parts of your body need each other, we as Christians need each other in order to grow and become all we were meant to become in Jesus.

And so I call on our baptismal candidates—and the whole congregation—to actively live out your identity as a member of Christ's body. Church isn't a place you go; it's who you are! So engage wholeheartedly in the life of the local church—in group life, in serving, in giving, in inviting others to Cornerstone whether in-person or online, because you are a member of God's family.

There are several other aspects of our identity in Jesus that I could talk about this morning, but the final one I want to focus on is the most important of all. In Jesus, **I am a beloved child of God.**

Listen carefully. When you get baptized, you are making some very important statements, some declarations. You are declaring to God, to yourself, and to all of us that Jesus is the Lord of your life, and that you will follow him the rest of your days.

But even more importantly, through your baptism, God is declaring some extremely important things to you. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the voice of God the Father could be heard from heaven. What did God the Father say to Jesus as he came up out of the waters of the Jordan that day? God said:

You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.⁶

When you are baptized, God, the heavenly Father, says to you the very same thing he said to Jesus on the day of his baptism:

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:13b (NIV)

⁶ Mark 1:11 (NLT)

You are my dearly loved daughter, and you bring me great joy!

That's true of everyone who has been baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ. And that's what God the Father longs to say to those of you who have yet to follow Jesus.

The Bible says in 1 John:

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are!⁷

It's an identity thing! Through baptism, you're given the unspeakable opportunity and privilege of becoming God's very own children. With great pleasure, God declares that he has chosen you—yes you!—to be adopted into his very own family.

To be a child of God means that you are unconditionally loved and completely accepted by God in Christ. There is nothing you could do to make God love you more, and there is nothing you could do that would make God love you less.

You no longer have to strive to find your sense of identity, your sense of worth. You need look nowhere else to define who you are, because God defines who you are in Christ: You are God's beloved child, and he loves you so much that he thought you were worth Jesus dying for.

As you learn to live in your identity as a beloved child of God, you'll find that you can be free to grow in Christ-like character, and to love others as yourself, because you know that God's love for you in Christ will never, ever run out.

If you're watching, and you're interested in being baptized, or learning more about it before you decide, I encourage you to visit the baptism page on our website, which you'll see on the screen and in the chat area: <http://cornerstonechurch.ca/Baptism>. There you can find a downloadable baptism guide, and info about how to take your next steps toward baptism.

We'd love to baptize you next time we celebrate baptisms at Cornerstone!

⁷ 1 John 3:1a (NIV)