

God's Promise: New Life

By Scott Runyon

First Baptist Church of Birmingham

February 3, 2019

Matthew 3:11-17

CHILDREN'S TIME

A month ago we began a new year. At the beginning of the year, people sometimes make new promises about things they hope to do in the new year. It is like a new beginning for them.

There are times when we celebrate a different kind of new beginning through something called baptism. Baptism is a very wonderful and important celebration in our church. Later in the service, we will bring you back up to the sanctuary to watch as two people are baptized: Grace and Qwynn.

We baptize people in this church when they are old enough to choose to be a Christian and live the life of a follower of Jesus.

When someone is baptized here we take them up into the baptism pool that is filled with water like a big tub, and we dip them under the water and bring them up out of the water. In a way, it is like getting washed when you take a bath, but we don't use any soap. Baptism is

like getting all cleaned in order to have a new beginning. We do this in front of the whole church family because we want everyone to support the people getting baptized.

In the bible, we can read that Jesus was baptized too. He was baptized by a man named John just before he started his new ministry on earth. After his baptism he began teaching and people came to understand that Jesus was truly God's Son, and they began to follow him.

So, I look forward to seeing you back up here in the sanctuary to watch this very important celebration of baptism in just a little while.

SERMON

READ MATTHEW 3:11-17

NT. Wright compares this scene to a great music event that has all the billing and build up of a concert of the century. Imagine that you have been invited to this concert to hear a musician that is certain to blow you away with killer musicianship and superb stage performance. The pyrotechnics and lights in this production are unlike anything that has ever been used on any stage anywhere.

There is such a build up to this event that everyone throughout the city has been talking it up. You enter the concert hall with immense anticipation and take your seat amid an electric atmosphere, full of energy and awe. You have a program in your hand and are waiting on the edge of your seat for the dramatic, explosion of music that is sure to come any moment.

The MC approaches the stage to announce that the musician has arrived and is ready to perform. The MC invites all to their feet and a roar emanates from the crowd around you.

To your amazement, a small unassuming, average looking man walks onto the stage, not with a guitar, but a little flute. This isn't at all what you expected.

Everyone becomes silent as the man begins to play a gentle and soft tune, unlike you had expected. As you listen you hear familiar themes and rhythms but played in a new way. The music is haunting and fragile, flowing into your imagination and hopes while transforming them.

As this piece of music comes to a close, an orchestra picks up with a rousing new version of the music

you had expected to hear when you arrived.

John the Baptist was the concert MC who was building up this man as one who was so much greater, much more powerful than he, whose sandals he was unfit to carry. He was the one who has at his command God's wind and fire. He's coming! Just you wait! You think things are a mess? This is the one who will clean things up so that only God's goodness is left! He'll sort it all out. Just you wait!

Everyone in the crowd was on their feet in expectation of a great and mighty leader next to whom they might find their place in his shadow. Perhaps it will be God in the flesh who, with a sweeping stroke of his guitar, transform all the world with a single riff that sends a blaze of color and light across the land.

Instead, the people get Jesus, a carpenter, who has had a price on his head since birth about 30 years prior.

It is Jesus, who comes identifying not much with a judgement-filled God who will sweep verdict on the sinful land, but one who comes in humility akin to the common people who themselves are facing judgment and who are in need of forgiveness.

This tells us something about the gospel message. God is indeed coming to fulfill the ancient promise to all people — to provide a new life throughout the world by way of God's Spirit, and also to rescue God's people from every sort of exile.

Remember, it was through the waters of the Red Sea that the Hebrew people were given new life on the other side of exile. Jesus was again doing the work of God and providing new life but doing it in a way so unexpected — in a way so much more gritty and common place than anyone would have guessed.

Jesus was being baptized into God's redemptive work for the people. He became humble and walked along side and identified with the common people, living their life, and eventually dying their death.

This was Jesus' commissioning service as he began a new work.

It began a new chapter in the story of God's people — the most remarkable story that unfolds in the rest of Matthews book.

Jesus' journey parallels and completes the story of the exodus. Israel's people came through he Red Sea and were given the law

and declared God's firstborn. Jesus came up from the waters of baptism and received the Spirit of God, the wind of God, the life of God, declaring him to be God's son, literally Israel in the flesh

The dove that brought the Spirit was a declaration of a different kind of coming judgement, not through waring or vindictive spirit, but through a Spirit that would bring peace.

As Jesus went into the waters of the Jordan, one age had ended. As he came up from the waters of baptism, a new chapter in the history of human beings began — the promised new life had dawned.

That same Jesus continues to be at work in the world today. Baptism for us is the celebration of God's promise of this new life in our world!

Just like the concert musician, we can expect to be surprised by what Jesus will do in our world and in our lives.

The challenge for Grace and Qwynn who are about to be baptized today, as well as all of us here, is to remain open with space in our hearts and in our lives to be surprised and find ourselves in the unexpected wonder of the new song that God is playing that truly

satisfies our deepest longing that exists beneath the surface in all of us.

BAPTISM

Baptism is a major step in faith and a celebration that carries many meanings. It symbolizes the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, the washing away of sins, the promise of new life in God's family, a sign of being included within a congregation, the sign of receiving the Holy Spirit, a sign of the promise of God's present and future kingdom in this world.

Earlier we heard from the beginning of the book of Matthew. At the very end of the book, Matthew records Jesus saying,

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20, NRSV)

We celebrate baptism of those who are old enough to choose a life of faith. We do this in the context of worship with the whole congregation to remind us that none of us can take this step alone. We need each other for support,

encouragement to keep and grow in our faith, and for accountability.

We also celebrate baptism in community so that each of you who have been baptized can remember your own baptism and renew your commitment to a life of faith.

The Christian life is difficult to begin with and even more difficult on our own. God knew this and gave us community, and we honor the relationships in our church family as we baptize these two today, Grace Charbeneau and Qwynn Runyon.

I want to invite Grace and Qwynn to come forward along with their sponsors, Judy Phillips and Emily Olsen. Their sponsors are here also making a commitment to support and encourage these two not just today but on into the future as they grow up in the faith.

Grace, I understand, took a baptism class here twice prior to my arrival, but never quite felt like taking the next step to be baptized until recently. She came to me a few months ago and said that God was nudging her and telling her that it was time to make a deeper commitment.

I am so excited that I have the honor to baptize Qwynn, my

daughter, today as well. Qwynn expressed interested several years ago to be baptized, but we never had the opportunity until now. God has been nudging her as well to deepen her faith and commit her life in a new way.

Grace, Qwynn and I have met both individually and together during the past few months. I have challenged them to read the book of Mark and discuss it. We talked about the always evolving journey of faith and where each of them is in that journey right now. We talked a bit about the history of the American Baptists, and some of this congregation's history.

I also challenged each of them to write a statement of their beliefs (knowing that these will certainly change over time) and also write a bit about their understanding of what God is nudging them to do in their life of faith. Now they will read those very personal statements.

All present who support these two being baptized in the Christian faith today, please say "Amen!"

In the baptism pool...

Pastor Scott: Have you professed your faith in Jesus as your Lord?

Grace /Qwynn: Yes.

Pastor Scott: Having felt God's nudge toward a life of faith in Jesus, do you desire to be baptized today in front of your family, friends, and this congregation?

Grace/Qwynn: Yes!

Pastor Scott: Then it is my honor to baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.