



## **The Steady Work of Living Water**

**Mark 1:4-11**

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Washington Street UMC

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We are continuing in our reading of the book *Wholehearted Faith*, by Rachel Held Evans. I want to again encourage you to pick up a copy and read along if you haven't already. We are reading two chapters each week, and providing further time for discussion on the reading during our after-worship small group, which you can join in-person or on Zoom.

This week, I'm focusing the message on chapter 9, in which Held Evans looks at the role of baptism in our faith journey.

Baptism is a central act in the Christian Church, but its practice is as varied as our denominational identities.

For some, baptism is offered to infants as a statement that God claims us even before we can make a decision to claim faith for ourselves. For others, baptism is reserved only for those who have the mental capacity to understand sin and repentance, and to profess their faith publicly before the congregation.

For some, baptism is a non-repeatable act, claiming that one cannot be re-baptized because baptism is about the work of God in claiming you, and God does not fail. For others, one can be re-baptized; an act that signifies that someone who had been baptized had fallen away from the church, and they have now come back to "re-enter" the faith.

For some, baptism is permitted with the sprinkling of water on the head. For others, baptism is an immersive experience, where your entire body must be submerged beneath the surface of the water.

For some, baptism is only permitted with holy water that has come from the Jordan River. For others, any water is sufficient.

For some churches, baptism is a private act, offered in a ceremony for just family and friends. For others, baptism is a public act, offered in the midst of the Sunday morning worship service.

For some, baptism is an individual event, expressing one's personal connection with God. For others, baptism is a communal event, solidifying a personal connection with both God and the community.

Each of these differences is rooted in a personal or denominational theological conviction, most of which are based on varying biblical texts.

For example, in the United Methodist Church, we baptize *infants* in part because in Acts 16, verse 15, it is written, “When [Lydia] and her **household** were baptized ...” There is a clear indication that the whole family was baptized, which would have included the children. We also baptize children because, as the Christian community expanded in the early centuries, it was determined one need not be circumcised to be part of this covenant community. Baptism, while not becoming a direct replacement for circumcision, was seen as a similar sign of belonging – and since circumcision was something required in the Hebrew Scriptures on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after birth, baptism was also understood to also be available for infants. It is a way you are initiated into the faith community.

For those unfamiliar with baptism in the United Methodist Church, let me offer a quick rundown of our theological convictions on baptism, which, for United Methodism, is one of our two sacraments – with sacrament defined as an act in which Christ both participated and instructed us to participate in.

United Methodists believe that baptism is available to persons of every age. It is both a public and communal act, offered as a part of worship with the church community participating, where both the family or individual commits to the faith, and where the faith community commits to share in faith with the newly baptized individual. We have no preference on water (sparkling, still, or holy is sufficient). And, while we often sprinkle with water, applying the water to the head of the person being baptized, United Methodist Churches can use immersion for baptism. Since most of our churches do not have baptismal tanks to immerse, when immersion is opted for, it’s usually done in local pools, rivers, or lakes. And, finally, we do not rebaptize. We believe baptism is a sign of God’s work, and God’s claim on our life sticks, even if we don’t always stick around.

Given all the differences that exist in our denominational subsets of Christianity around baptism, there is one similarity among us all: we all use water. In every one of our baptismal practices, water is the conveying symbol of God’s presence and claim on our life.

In our scripture reading today, coming in Mark 1:4-11, we find the indisputable origins of baptism for the Christian church.

Mark’s gospel is quite different than the other two synoptics – Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke provide for us the Advent stories of Mary and Elizabeth, Joseph and the shepherds, the manger and the star. Mark doesn’t seem interested in the backstory. In Mark 1:1, we read, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” And then Mark jumps right in with Jesus, the now-adult Son of God, whose presence is defined as the good news.

We don’t learn about the relational nature between Jesus and John the Baptizer in Mark’s Gospel, but John the Baptizer takes center stage as the narrative begins. John is in the wilderness, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” His presence was causing quite the impression on people, as “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.” While there, all of these people were baptized by John in the River Jordan, while also confessing their sins.

This is the first time we see such a public use of baptism as a part of the invitation to faith, which carries with it an call to repentance – to literally “turn around,” or to let one’s heart and conduct change. And yet, while all these people were being baptized by John, they were not committing themselves to a new religious profession. These people didn’t return to Jerusalem, or all the Judean countryside, thinking they were now part of a new Christian community. These were Jews, steeped in the Jewish tradition, and part of the Jewish religion.

While there in the wilderness, while being baptized by John in the Jordan River, John proclaims, “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.” At that time, John is not initiating these baptized persons into a new faith – but he is calling them to be prepared for God to do something new. In his baptizing, John was using water, but indicated that someone was coming who would baptize them with the Spirit.

We know, because we have the rest of the text, that John was talking about the Holy Spirit, whose presence is recorded following Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

The gifting of the Spirit comes at Pentecost, an event recorded in Acts, chapter 2, that officially solidifies the formation of a new Christian community. It is not until after the arrival of the Spirit in Acts 2 that we learn that people were “added” to this new community of faith. In fact, if we read from Acts 2, we find that Peter, in his initial sermon following the gifting of the Spirit, is echoing the same invitation as John in the wilderness, with one significant difference. Peter offers this invitation in his Pentecost sermon, “Repent, and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit.”

For both John and Peter, baptism is about repentance and the forgiveness of sins, but now, instead of just being baptized with water and being forgiven, those who are baptized will receive the gift of the holy Spirit.

Throughout the book of Acts, we learn that it is the Spirit who becomes the indication of one’s belonging to the people of God in this new Christian community. When the Jerusalem Council didn’t want to permit Gentiles to be part of the new church, the argument that is made for their inclusion is the undeniable presence of the Spirit in their lives. Paul writes that it is the Spirit who gifts us to be incorporated into the Body of Christ that is the church – the visible and public witness of Christ in the world.

Even though Peter’s call to baptism differs than John’s because it includes the gifting of the Spirit, for both Peter and John, the act of baptism still involves water. Water – while not the symbol of inclusion into the new church community (that’s the Spirit) – water is the symbol of repentance and the forgiveness of sin. Water plays an important role in the act of baptism, and it connects us all the way back to the very first baptism, offered by John in the wilderness. Indeed, the water connects us back to Jesus’ baptism, offered by John in the wilderness.

Let’s talk about water for a minute.

Water plays a significant role throughout our Biblical text. In Genesis 1, we read, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Water is there in the very beginning; it marks a new creation.

In Genesis 7, we are told about the great flood, where it rained for forty days and forty nights. These waters are remembered for the way they washed away the old, and gave birth to a new beginning.

It was the waters of the red sea that Moses parted, through which the Israelites passed from slavery in Egypt into the wilderness that would lead them to the promised land. These waters again marked the passage way from a time of death and brokenness into a new beginning.

While in the wilderness, the people yearned to return to slavery in Egypt because they were literally dying of thirst. And so God instructed Moses to strike the stone with his staff, and a spring of water came forth, offering the people a new hope that they might continue to the promised land.

Water is a symbol in the events of our faith heritage, the reminder of that which was broken and made whole again. Water is a cleansing element, used to physically wash away dirt and grime, used symbolically to wash away sin, and in each case, providing a clean and new beginning.

But water is used for more than cleansing – water is used for reshaping. Consider the gorge of the Grand Canyon, which was formed after millennia of constant barrage from the Colorado River. Layer and layer of hardened rock were washed away by the constant flow of the water. As Held Evans writes, “Water is a force that does its steady work on even the hardest rock.”<sup>i</sup>

Perhaps, thinking of how water has shaped so much of our geographic landscape, we would do best not to limit the work of the waters of baptism to a single moment in our lives marked by a public display of sacramental rite. Perhaps we might better claim that the waters of baptism, once applied – whether to the tops of our heads, or through immersive dunking – continue to shape us. Perhaps we would best remember the waters of our baptism for the way they connect us to history of our faith – to the new beginnings that water has brought about among God’s people previously. Perhaps we should remember how the waters of our baptism enjoin us to the great cloud of witnesses that have come before us, to those who share in this lifetime with us, and to those who will come to faith after us.

We use water in the sacrament of baptism as a sign, for it is symbolic of all the times God has offered forgiveness and ushered in a new beginning; and it is symbolic of the ways in which God continues to mold us and shape us.

Let me conclude with one final story.

A few weeks ago, I got into my car to drive to church and I heard water sloshing around in the back seat. I looked in the back and noticed that in the footwell there was standing water. It had rained pretty heavily the day before, but I had not left any windows open, nor had any door been left ajar. When I got

home, I pulled out the wet-vac to get rid of the water. I sucked out almost two gallons of water from the back seat. I've inspected the car, and I'm still not 100% sure how the water is getting in – but tracing the water droplets, it appears that the water is coming in through the edge of the rear window, running across the top of the car, then down behind the rear seat, finding just enough passage way to make it in to the footwell where it is collecting. Indeed, it was wet again this morning following yesterday's rain.

You may wondering, what does your broken car have to do with our call to discipleship?

I think we have a tendency to believe that God can only reach the places in our lives which we open up to be changed. We believe that if we shut off certain areas of our lives, they are beyond God's control. Perhaps it's our relationships, perhaps it's our occupation, perhaps it's our finances, perhaps it's our bigotry (or the feelings we hold about others), perhaps it's our politics ... we think that if we don't talk to God about it, if we don't pray about it, if we aren't willing to consider a change in it, then God will just leave that area of our life alone.

But the waters of our baptism continue to flow, and they don't need but the smallest of crevices to form a new beginning. The waters of baptism continue to flow, and they don't need our permission to continue to shape and remold us. The waters of baptism continue to flow, and they remind us that God's work continues in our lives, calling us to repentance and washing us new, offering us the forgiveness of our sin.

In baptism, we are incorporated in the work of God in this world. The water is our reminder of God's constant work, renewing us and offering a way when we thought there was no way. And the Spirit incorporates us into this community, to be part of the Body of Christ, that together, renewed and forgiven, we might share together in the holy work of God in the world.

Remember your baptism. Remember the power of the water. Remember the gift of the Spirit. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rachel Held Evans. *Wholehearted Faith*. HarperOne, 2021.