

SECOND READING: Romans 6:1-6

6 What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. *This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD*

FIRST READING: Acts 8:26-39

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and ran. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD

*“Baptism Is...”

We pastors have fun when we get together telling stories of “the funny things that have happened in worship services”! The longer the pastor has been a pastor, the more the stories. And many of the stories, not surprisingly, have to do with baptismal ceremonies. Baptisms are holy, sacred times, but there’s water involved and there’s humans, and sometimes young ones, so there’s always a chance for something out of the ordinary to happen.

Like when the Sr. Pastor that I was working with one time reached into the font in order that he might scoop up some water for a baptism and then realized that there was none to scoop up! He quietly asked ME to get some. I knew it needed to happen quickly so, I stepped behind the chancel wall and emptied the water out of all the flower vases which were stored back there into the bowl. I returned ceremonially holding the bowl filled with water.... And... just a few leaves and stems and a bit of dirt floating in there too. We both later laughed that it was likely the closest thing we’d had may have been to being baptized in the Jordan. And then there’s the stories of babies grabbing hold of ministers’ beards or glasses or lapel mics, stories of heavily hair-sprayed hair turning to glue when water in hand is placed on the head, stories of children refusing to be dunked, screaming and holding onto the edges of those deep fonts that some churches use, like cats. So many more.

*A favorite is told by Rev. John Buchanan, retired pastor from 4th Presbyterian in Chicago. He describes a time wherein he took a very compliant little toddler comfortably in his arms and said, “*Christopher James, you are a child of God, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.*” The child looked him directly in the eyes and said, clearly and loudly, “*Uh-oh*”.¹

Well, you know, as funny as that I’m sure was, it’s a fact that when we realize the truth in the baptismal words, that we BELONG to Christ forever, we can only begin to imagine the enormous, nearly limitless opportunities which are in store for us, which are ahead of us, which can be accomplished with God’s empowering claim on us. “*Uh Oh*” may be an appropriate response actually....for the world needs to watch out!

¹ John Buchanan. Sermon: “*The God who Calls*” <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons.2010/110710.html> (accessed 5-4-17).

***You see,** baptism is first and foremost a proclamation of God's activity in choosing us. Our relationship with God, established in our baptism, is the one relationship in life we can't mess up because we do not establish it. Baptism is not dependent on us or our faith. Martin Luther says, that *"if it did, we would scarcely ever arrive at the assurance of having sufficient enough faith for it,"*² I think, consequently, that there can be no greater symbol of this God-initiated activity than infant baptism, our bringing babies who have not done anything but eat, sleep and discover their world to the font, and like all of us, babies who CAN never do anything but simply receive God's love and then live as the persons they've been claimed and called to be.

***Certainly,** this God-initiated relationship, is affirmed in the grown individual's baptism as well, sometimes call the "Believer's" baptism. The Ethiopian official came to know it, for Scripture says that following his baptism he went away rejoicing. He was a man of great power and means, since he was the Treasurer of the queen's haram, but he'd been made a eunuch from birth so as to not threaten the king. He was a social outcast, prohibited from temple worship, and banned from social gatherings. But yet, he, he was being compelled by the Spirit in him, to travel the long way to Jerusalem to earnestly seek a truth which could make sense of his world. The disciple, Philip, was at the same time in a different place being told by an angel to go to the hard, dangerous road to Gaza in the Judean wilderness. When told to go, Philip dropped everything else and "ran"! And once there, he found the Ethiopian, the seeker, in his chariot reading Scripture. Using the prophesy of Isaiah, Philip instructed him regarding Jesus. He told him Jesus was the Messiah in whom God's plan for humanity is fulfilled... the One who suffered for us all. And then, and then, the Ethiopian asked what hindered him from baptism? What hindered him from baptism? And recognizing that nothing did...Philip baptized him.

***Friends,** the Spirit was not then, nor ever has been, hindered by race, gender, geography, economics, physical defect, or age. Instead, the Spirit freely calls us all, and we can never do anything but simply receive the love, unconditionally and freely poured out like water. We can do nothing but receive it with gratitude, and then live as the persons we've been called to be.

² <http://www.gachurch.org/wp-content/uploads/baptism-handout.pdf>. (accessed 5-5-17)

***That's what baptism** is, first and foremost...making known God's activity, calling, initiating us into the Faith. But it's also about something else. It's about identity. It's about who we are and whose we are. In Jesus' baptism we learn that what belongs to Jesus belongs to us. While sinless, Jesus stepped into the Jordan to show us that he has taken on what is ours.. our identity as mortal, human sinful creatures...and has come to share what belongs to him, that is new life, new, forgiven eternal life. We experience it like we experience a washing with clean, pure water, or like we experience taking a breath of air when we come up out of water! We live in his way, no longer controlled by the power of sin...free, forgiven, fresh, new and without fear. Jesus shares this with us. This is his and he shares it with us. He also shares his inheritance with us too. Our new lives will extend to be with God forever, just as Jesus lives forever with God in glory, forever, so do we. ***In Romans 6**, Paul says, *"As many of us were baptized into Christ, we were baptized into his death, and just as Christ was raised, so we walk in newness of life."*

***So, friends**, baptism is first proclaiming God's initiative in calling us to the Faith, and it is also a proclamation about who we are. We are, all of us, forgiven children of God. All of us. And because we all are this, we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are siblings in the same family, sharing the same parent and sharing this, the same new way to live in Christ. It's like we're in the same swimming pool, connected by the same water. Baptism is something that unites us.

***And finally**, friends, baptism is also about work, holy work! As baptized children of God, brothers and sisters in the family of Faith, the global community of believers, stretching all the way back and all the way forward in time, *"are not only marked with the cross of Christ forever,"* but we are marked for service. We are called in our baptism to begin a life journey of faithful servanthood. We are called to dedicate ourselves to Christ's divine work in and for the world. As John Wesley said, *"To do all the good we can....by all the means we can....in all the ways we can...in all the places we can..at all the times we can...to all the people we can...as long as ever we can."*³

³esley. https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/151350.John_Wesley. (accessed 5-5-7).

*It reminds me of when I held Joel for the first time, looking at his little toes and wrinkly knees, his soft, warm body and not so round head, I marveled at this miraculous gift of life, this gift from God. I also had a very sacred sense that the real work, the true work for me and Mike was about to begin and things would not ever be the same again.*⁴ Certainly, following his baptism, the Ethiopian understood being marked for service too . Tradition says that he, Simeon Bachos, spent the rest of his life as an evangelist in his country, preaching what he himself now believed.⁵

Yes, little Christopher James, you may have been very right in saying, “*Uh Oh*”. For you and all the baptized belong to Jesus Christ forever and through the POWER of his Spirit, the world is in for a big change! You do not know where your journey will take you, maybe not onto a Gazan road, but then again, may be! Who knows? Regardless, you will go with and empowered by the One who claimed you before you were born, who will continue to love you no matter how often you fall short or fail, who will never let you go.... “*even to the end of the age.*”

*That's what baptism is, friends. May the glory be his. Amen.

⁴ OPUMC. “Sermon (8/31/14): “*Growing into Baptism*”. <http://www.opumc.com/index.php/about-us/sermons/32-sermon-growig-into-baptism>.

⁵Eusebius. *Histori Ecclesiastica*, 2.2.13-14. In: Will Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*. (Atlanta: JK Press: 1988), 72.