

## “Back in the Water”

It was my first official baptism as a pastor. I had been in ministry for many years, but since my first calls after seminary were as either the associate pastor (to which the head pastor never allowed me to participate in baptisms as he liked to do them himself, or, when I was the senior pastor, it was to a much older congregation who had all been baptized. This, in 2014, was my first experience baptizing people.

While there are many similarities between the denomination I was serving at the time, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the PCUSA, there are some differences when it comes to sacraments. For example, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), practices communion every single week. And baptisms are different. The Disciples of Christ perform what are called, “Believer’s Baptisms.” And baptisms take place, not at a font, but in a baptistry. In this particular church, the baptistry was in the chancel area, raised up a little. There were curtains that would be closed when the baptistry was not in use. Stairs on both sides so there was a flow: people coming in one set of stairs and out the others. When children were in 4th or 5th grade they would make the decision to be baptized. I held what was called a, “pastor’s class.” This was not unlike confirmation. It was a class that covered almost all the same subjects, learning about scripture, prayer, the trinity, worship, serving others, the sacraments, and the denomination, but was done in a much shorter time frame. This class was seen as a beginning to discipleship and church membership. And on this particular Sunday I had 4 children, who has completed the pastor’s class, and one adult who had his own version of a pastor’s class.

All this learning and spending time together led up to the day of baptism. I was just as nervous as they were. I was several months pregnant with my daughter and I remember emailing some of my female clergy colleagues to ask how best to do this as my growing belly would certainly get in the way. After many suggestions I figured it out.

I put on the waders the church owned for their former 6 foot tall male pastors and the white baptismal robe, and I carefully walked into the waters that day.

The curtains on the baptistry were open. The choir, singing from the balcony, finished their song, and the organ bellowed out its final note and I began to speak. Reading scripture and praying over chilly waters. I invited the first child to come into the waters. He descended into the water on one

side. On the other was one of my sweet church ladies who stood with towels ready to greet the newly baptized.

Alex was a 5th grader. Alex was somewhere on the spectrum. Alex struggled to fit in with others. Alex was awkward and different. Alex was also a foot taller than me and a good 80 pounds more. Alex was no small kid. Alex didn't have a lot of friends. In fact, I'm not sure if Alex had any friends. Alex didn't have a relationship with his dad. His father had been abusive when he was around, so his being gone was really a good thing. His mom was a single woman who worked 2 jobs to keep a roof over their head and food on the table. He had a brother, but the brother was much older and lived out of town. Alex liked to draw and play the upright bass. He was good at math and science. He struggled in almost every other aspect of his life. Alex desperately wanted to have a place to belong. Alex and I practiced how I would baptize him the week before...I needed to choreograph how this "dunking" him under the water would work. I asked if he just wanted me to pour water on his head. He said no. He wanted to go under and come up just like everyone else. I was determined to make it happen.

On that day, I stood there in my white robe and Alex waded through the water to join me in his matching baptismal robe. He was the first of 5 to be baptized that day. We had a tradition where each newly baptized had a mentor who got to know those being baptized would stand before the church and introduce them before I began.

Alex joined me in the water and a gentleman from the church stood at the lectern and introduced Alex telling everyone he liked mint chocolate chip ice cream and playing video games. Then, with one hand on Alex's back and the other raised in the air, I said, "Alex, child of God, I baptize you in the name of the father, the son and the holy spirit. Amen." Then I helped Alex into that water and lifted him out, just as we had practiced. I handed him a cloth to wipe the water away from his eyes.

As he was leaving the waters and the next mentor was approaching to introduce the next student coming to be baptized, I heard a funny noise coming from the steps.

I turned to look, and there was the church lady with the towels saying, "Alex, come on. Alex, you have to get out." I looked, and there was Alex, laid back in the water, arms stretched out as far as they would go in that little baptistry, trying to float, and on his face was the biggest grin. This look of complete content on his face. Alex never smiled. But in that moment, Alex felt joy and peace, and a sense of belonging and I could not take that moment away from him. I stopped the mentor before she began to speak

and asked the next student to wait just a moment and I said to the congregation, "You cannot see what I see, but please know that we are going to take a moment for Alex. He wants to bask in the glory of the Holy Waters of baptism a little longer. And we're going to let him." I backed up and gave him some space. A few seconds later, Alex stood up and took his towel as he climbed up the steps and out of the holy waters.

And that is the story of the very first person I ever baptized. It was raw and it was beautiful.

Wait, no, I lied, that *is* the story of the first person I ever assisted with a baptism. You see, I have never baptized people. I have assisted with baptisms. God is the one who baptizes. It doesn't matter how it's done or where it's done, or at what age it is done, God is the one who does the baptizing.

We like to say that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, but when we reread this story, we see that John may have been assisting Jesus into the holy waters that day as we know the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus that day.

What an amazing picture! There they are, in the midst of the wilderness, at the river Jordan. John dressed in his funny clothes and Jesus standing next to him. The book of Mark doesn't begin with the birth of Jesus, but begins the story of, "Good News," with the baptism of Jesus. It is here where the incredible love God has for Jesus is experienced by God claiming Christ. It is after this proclamation that Jesus begins his ministry.

Scholar Karoline Lewis paints the picture of God tearing apart skies to get to Jesus, to get to the people of God. The skies don't just open, but are torn apart.

The greek word, "Schizo" is used here which means torn apart. It's a different word from open. Schizo is used again in Mark at the crucifixion. The words, "you are my son" are used three times in the book of Mark, here at the baptism, at the transfiguration, and again at the crucifixion. All of this is to say, God is with Jesus and claims Jesus more than once and will tear apart the heavens just to reach out to Jesus.

Isn't that what God wants for us as well? God wants us to know that God will tear apart the heavens just to get to us and claim us as beloved. It does not matter who we are. It does not matter how good we have been. It does not matter how worthy or unworthy we feel of love and grace. It does not matter if we are sick or scared. It does not matter if we feel unlovable or how broken or battered or bruised we may be, God wants to know us and claim us. God wants to tear the skies open and get to you, letting you know

you are beloved and that you belong in the community of Christ, you belong as a child of God as a part in the realm of God. You belong and you are loved and worthy and forgiven and that you matter. You belong here. You belong in God's family and you have a place in this kingdom of God, which is not a far off place, but is here and it is now. You belong and you are loved. No matter what we have done or where we are on life's journey, we belong to God and through those holy waters God claims us and calls us by name.

I believe the skies were torn apart that day for Alex...God stopped at nothing that day to let him know he belonged...he belonged to the church, but more importantly, Alex belonged to God. That day, Alex knew he was beloved. He knew he belonged. And God tears apart the skies for you as well.

In a few minutes we will partake in communion. As you come forward, you are invited to stop at the font. Touch those waters, remember your baptism. Remember that God tears apart the skies to reach you and to remind you that God loves you. Take some water, place it on your head or make the sign of the cross on your forehead or on the back of your hand. Have a neighbor do it for you if that is better for you. But stop at the font, even if you have never actually been baptized, stop at the font on the way down for communion and remind yourself that God will stop at nothing to reach you and call you beloved. Take a moment to bask in the glory and mystery of the Holy Waters. Soak it all in and remember who you are and whose you are. You are a child of God, holy made and divinely inspired. Get back in the water and remember.  
Amen.