

“A Chronicle of Grace”
delivered Sunday, August 30, 2009
by Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor
Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC
Psalm 46
Ephesians 4:1-6

The water with which we have baptized young Layla this morning has a long history. On the one hand, there is nothing special about that water in the baptismal font. It was taken from the faucet in the communion preparation room just outside the front of the sanctuary. Just plain, regular old tap water. On the other hand, there is absolutely nothing ordinary at all about that water. It has a history, a long sacred history. Baptismal water flows through the Bible and the community of faith as a chronicle of grace. Simple tap water, in the act of baptism, tells the story of a remarkable journey of God’s mighty acts through human history.

My friend, Tom Frank, who teaches at Candler School of Theology at Emory, remembers growing up on the mighty Mississippi and a story told and retold during his childhood about a great flood. Once when the spring rains flooded the Mississippi River, the main channel moved over a couple of miles, so that a farm where slavery was practiced suddenly found itself in the adjacent state, a free state, and all the slaves had to be let go. The river has a swift justice, and the water that flows through the stories of scripture – likewise – recalls passages of liberation for the people of God.

Remember the Exodus and how God led the tiny little tribe of ancient Israel through the sea as if on dry land. Remember in the Wilderness how the people cried out to Moses, "Why did you lead us out here to this wretched place? We would rather have died in Egypt than out here from hunger and thirst!" But God said to Moses, strike the rock; and when he did, even in that barren place, water flowed fresh and cool to quench the people's thirst. Remember how the prophet Ezekiel pictured that trickle of living water welling up right under the altar, flowing from the threshold of God's house -- so that all of creation would know the Source of life itself. Wherever the people gathered in God’s name, according to the prophet, this living water bubbling up from the altar joins the flow from other streams, it builds up, Ezekiel cries, into a knee-deep stream, and into a neck-deep river, and finally into a torrent of joy. The Woman at the Well asked Jesus. "Where are you going to get this living water? You don't even have a bucket." And Jesus replied that whoever drank the water he would give them, would never be thirsty again. "The water that I shall give will turn into a spring inside them, welling up into eternal life." "Oh, sir," the woman replied, "give me some of that water." "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God," says the Psalmist, "the holy habitation of the Most High." It is fresh, life-giving; it is calm and gentle with God's grace; it sweeps along everything that stands in the way of God's justice. It makes way for God's new creation. *That* is the water that flows from the baptismal font, the life-giving grace of those who confess one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism.

When I arrived at Shandon and celebrated the first of now seemingly countless baptisms, there was something I found curious about baptism services here. I don’t know if you’ve paid much attention to this, but our baptismal font moves all over the place. If the bells are playing over here – the font is over there. If the children are singing over here, we baptize over there. If the bells are playing, and the children are singing we land up in front of the center aisle. In the other churches I have served, the baptismal font just stayed where it was supposed to be, but here I never seem to be celebrating this sacrament in the same place twice in a row. Over time, what

has occurred to me is that it makes perfect sense to have a mobile baptismal font, because the “river whose streams make glad the city of God,” moves freely with God’s abundant grace.

We who have been baptized bear the seal of Christ upon us wherever we go, and no matter the strength or weakness of our faith at any given moment, we are marked forever and claimed as children of God. All during his life, the great leader of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, would suffer fits of depression. He endured long cycles of it. He said that the only remedy he had was to repeat to himself: “Baptismatus Sum.” I am baptized. No matter what, I am baptized. That’s all he needed to say. Who am I? I have been washed by the waters of baptism, and I am God’s now and forever. How do I know? I don’t know. All that I know is that I was baptized, and it was sealed for me. In baptism something was done for me that I had nothing to do with. Nevertheless, it makes it official – actual – real for me. The waters of baptism flow, not only through scripture, but through our very lives as a chronicle of grace – no matter what, come what may – we are sealed as God’s forever.

Do you realize what a blessing it is to be part of a church that celebrates so many baptisms? In the 35 Sundays of 2009, we have celebrated 23 baptisms of infants, children, members of the Confirmation Class, young adults, and older adults. And every time we celebrate a baptism, we are reminded that each person -- in this family of Christ and household of God -- is a player in a much larger drama, a wonderfully holy narrative. Because through the water we use flows “the great, sweeping story of God’s love affair with the world, from creation to the end of time.”

Professor Tom Long has said it this way: “You’re in this story. This is your story, too. When we were baptized, we crossed the Red Sea with Moses and the Israelites, and we plunged down into the Jordan River with Jesus. Every Sunday, we walk right into God’s house, dragging along with us the anxieties and joys of life – like worrying about our kids and drugs, or trying to figure out just which way to turn next in our job, or feeling so grateful for that new grandchild we spent the week bouncing on our knee – and we place the whole confusing episodic tangle of it in the offering plate and say, “God, make sense of this.” And God takes the half-baked subplots that make up our lives, and does a little rewriting and, behold, they have become part of the biggest, best, most hopeful drama of all. No matter how episodic our life may seem when we are living it day to day, worship lets us see that we are actually key actors in a grand and holy narrative, and if we are paying attention, we walk out of worship knowing that life itself is a sacred drama, and we are ready to tell whoever will listen that we are all playing important roles, sacred roles.” (1)

That water in the font may seem like simple tap water, but in reality it is a river, whose streams make glad the city of God, and it carries your precious life on a journey through a chronicle of grace. AMEN.

NOTES

(1) Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p. 124-125.