

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
June 21, 2015  
Pentecost 4  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Job 38:1-18  
Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32  
2 Corinthians 5:14-21  
Mark 4:35-41

In a few minutes we will welcome Pedro and Jose Ward to the family of God through the sacrament of baptism. So I want to talk a bit about that in the sermon this morning.

In the Wesleyan and Anglican traditions, baptism is a *sacrament*. It is not merely *symbolic*; it is *sacramental*. We will invite the Ward family to the front for the ritual, but make no mistake, the focus will not be on what *they* do. *God* will be doing something.

To learn what God will be doing, we turn to the definition of a sacrament, and to Scripture, including our lessons this morning.

The classic definition of a sacrament is this: ***a sacrament is an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the same.*** Many of us may have grown up being taught only the first half of that definition. Consequently, we came to view baptism primarily as a human act. Baptism is when a person who has professed faith in Jesus stands up publicly to confess that faith.

The Wesleyan and Anglican traditions believe that the failure to include the second half of the definition of a sacrament leads to confusion about what is really happening, and about *who is doing what*.

The word “sacrament” comes from a Latin word that means “mystery.” When you join that with the notion of an outward sign of inward grace, and the *means* whereby that grace is received, then our understanding of what is happening changes.

For now we must see that baptism is primarily about *God’s* action, not human action. God is doing something. Something happens. Through the outward sign of water, God draws near. Grace is imparted. The Holy Spirit is given. The invisible God reveals Himself to us in visible ways, through tangible “stuff.”

How does God do this? All I can say is, “it’s a mystery.”

Notice I said that sacramental grace is a *mystery*. It is not *magic*. The church has always taught that for a sacrament to be effective, *faith* must be present. In the case of infants and small children, faith is often exercised on the part of the parents and the faith community – by proxy, as it were.

If this sounds strange, consider how parents makes decisions on behalf of their children all the time. Parents make decisions about a child’s health care,

about their education, and all other important matters in life. Why should they not make decisions for their children's spiritual nurture?

In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter tells the gathered crowd: "Repent and be baptized, all of you, for the forgiveness of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you, and for your children, and for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord will call" (Acts 2:38ff.).

In bringing infants and small children for baptism, parents are merely affirming what both the Old and New Testaments consistently teach us – that God always makes provision for young children to be included in God's covenant promises. Children are never excluded from the covenant promise.

This is why biblical writers often use the image of adoption to describe how we become part of God's family. It reminds us that before an adopted person chooses, he or she is first *chosen*. The Ward family is a living example of this.

Let me ask a silly question this morning: How did Jose and Pedro become part of the Ward family? Jose and Pedro did not choose to become part of the Ward family. *Chris and Lori chose them*. They were chosen to become part of the Ward family. And as Jose and Pedro grow, Chris and Lori are now teaching them everything that it means to be a Ward, everything that is involved in being part of this family.

Jose and Pedro do not have to wait until they are older to say, “I want to be a Ward.” They are part of the Ward family *now*.

Biblical writers use the image of adoption to show us that before we ever know and love God, God has loved us, and chosen us and made provision for us to be included in His covenant family. The sacrament of baptism *proclaims and enacts this Gospel truth*.

Let me try to connect this truth briefly to our Scripture lessons for today. Psalm 107 speaks of God’s redemption using an interesting image. The image is of people being gathered from all directions, some of whom went down to the sea in ships. God speaks, and a great storm arises, prompting the people to cry out to the Lord in their distress.

Then God stilled the storm, and the Psalmist says that “the people were glad because of the calm, and God brought them to the harbor they were bound for.” The Psalmist concludes by saying: “Let them give thanks to the Lord for his mercy and the wonders he does for his children.”

Let’s pair that with the Gospel lesson, where the disciples are with Jesus in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. A fierce storm arises, water is coming into the boat, and the disciples frantically rouse a sleeping Jesus, who then rebukes the storm and brings calm to everyone.

When I first became a Christian and came into the church, a lady in the church said: “thank God that young man is now in the ark of safety.” I had no idea what she was talking about. I didn’t realize that she was probably thinking of Peter’s second epistle, where he wrote these words. Speaking about Christ, he said:

*He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom he also went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves **you** also – not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. (2 Peter 3:20-22)*

I subsequently discovered that throughout the history of the church, Christians have seen the Ark and the boat in Scripture as an image of the church, of the covenant community of God’s promise.

If you remember nothing else from this day, remember this: Through the sacrament of holy baptism, today is the day when God reached down with His arms of love, grabbed hold of Pedro and Jose, lifted them up and placed them into the boat with Jesus.

Today is the day when God shows us (through the visible sign of water) that before Jose and Pedro ever knew or spoke the name of Jesus, God knew them, and made provision for them to be included in His covenant promise.

Today is the day God places His Spirit in them and marks them as His own.  
And in response, their parents, and all of us, pledge to God that we will teach and  
show them all the joys and responsibilities of being in the boat with Jesus.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.