



May/June 2015

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**CHILDREN
OF GOD**

ALSO: LIVING UNDER WATER

Friends:

I recently discovered a photo from about 1915 of my grandfather and his younger siblings. I was amused to see how my great uncle, then about six years old, looked so much like my own son when he was six years old. They could be brothers if there weren't almost a century between them. It's amazing how that family resemblance has persisted through generations!



Scripture calls God our Father, reminding us that as his children, we too should have a family resemblance. The apostle John says God is light and love, and we are called to reflect God's love and light in a dark world. We should look like our Father!

In May, Pastor Rob Jansons explores with us more of what it means to be children of God. What does it mean for us to call him Father?

Then, in June, Pastor Kevin Adams reflects on how we become God's children in baptism. We have been washed clean and claimed by God—so what does it look like for us to live under the waters of baptism?

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

—Steven Koster

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“Children of God”
Rob Jansons



“Living Under Water”
Kevin Adams

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re FRAME MEDIA

may

Children of God

Rob Jansons

God reveals himself throughout Scripture as our loving Father. I am a child of God. So are you. This simple truth means that our Father God wants us to know him personally and wants us to live more intimately in his presence. The Bible is God's long love letter that shares his heart for his children.

Salvation in the Bible is much more than just escaping the punishment for our sin. Salvation is adoption into a family made possible by our brother Jesus, who is also our Savior and Lord. This involves our homecoming to an extravagant celebration, our new life of freedom in which we thrive in the Father's approval, and our inheritance of all the riches of the Father's lavish love. Christianity is so much more than just a religion. Faith in the one true God and Father of all is a vital, growing relationship between parent and child.

As you explore these amazing truths this month, may you discover the wonderful privileges of being a child of the living God.

Rob Jansons is the pastor of New Hope Fellowship in Monroe, Washington, where he has served for almost twenty years. He and his wife, Sue, have been married since 1989 and have three daughters. Rob spends time each year in Calcutta, India, working with a Christian ministry to children living in slums. He enjoys hiking in the Pacific Northwest, camping with his family, reading, writing, and being a pastor.

CHILDREN OF GOD

To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. —John 1:12

Theologians use big words and elaborate concepts to explain God and our relationship with him. But the Bible more often uses simple images that are easy to understand. My favorite is that God is our Father and we are his children. It's that simple.

I have been a father for over twenty years, and I have enjoyed a healthy relationship with my own father. Based on my experience of being both a son and a father, I have a pretty good idea of what a father is supposed to be. God's revealing himself as our Father is a concept on which I can hang my faith.

Usually a father is someone older, wiser, and stronger. He is someone with a deep interest in your well-being. He cares about you and provides for you. He knows your name. He is interested in the things that

interest you. A good father is available, especially when you really need him.

John 1:12 declares that all who believe in Jesus are given the right to become God's children. Faith in Jesus opens the door of belonging to the family of God.

In a world where it is easy to get lost in the crowd and feel anonymous and insignificant, there is a Father who loves you. There is a Father calling you home. There is a Father who wants you to know that you are his child.

Lord, help us to accept the reality that we are your beloved children. May we feel your presence today in our everyday lives and be reminded of your fatherly care. In Jesus' name, Amen.

IN MY FATHER'S HANDS

"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one."

—John 17:11

When our youngest daughter was a baby, I could hold her in my right hand. I would toss her above my head and catch her on the way down. She would beam with excitement, her shiny eyes like sliver moons. On the second trip up, a delightful giggle would tumble out from deep within her.

Though I was throwing her into the air, there was no fear in her expectant gaze—only trust. She was literally in her father's hands, hands that had never dropped her, that had always cared for her, that had always tried to protect her.

I was more than ten times her weight, more than thirty times her age. My vocabulary and range of knowledge were far more complex than hers. Yet she had captured my heart as only one's child can.

In the Bible God reveals himself as our Father. I am a child of God. So are you. God wants us to know him more personally, more intimately. The Bible is God's long love letter that shares his heart for his children.

Salvation in the Bible is so much more than just escaping the punishment for our sin. Salvation is adoption into a family, a homecoming to an extravagant celebration, an inheritance of all the riches of the Father's lavish love. Have you been adopted into God's family?

Thank you, Father, for the amazing privilege of being your child. May childlike joy be restored to our lives and nurture a playful faith that trusts your unfailing hands. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE PERFECT FATHER

"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

—Matthew 7:11

When one of our daughters was a toddler, she fell off a picnic table onto a cement floor. I saw her lose her balance. I lunged for her, but I was too slow. Though she wasn't hurt, I learned that I can't always protect my kids. I am not with them all the time. Even when I am present, I might not be fast enough, strong enough, or smart enough to help them. I am not the superhero father I wish I could be.

By revealing himself as our Father, God compares himself to something we experience as fallible. Jesus even refers to the flawed goodness of earthly fathers to highlight the perfection of our heavenly Father. As much as we earthly fathers want to provide for and protect our children, our Father God does all the more.

And he is able. As the perfect Father, he is never too slow or caught off guard, never a helpless bystander. He is never too busy. Unlike even the best earthly father, God's motives are always perfectly good, even when we don't understand his actions or lack of intervention.

Jesus relied on the Father throughout his ministry. The strength and intimacy of that relationship is offered to all who believe in Jesus. In a world of uncertainty and danger, we need a perfect Father.

Father, we often find ourselves in need of your strength, wisdom, and protection. Thank you for always being there, always doing what is best for our well-being. In your Son's name, Amen.

THE FAITHFUL, PERFECT FATHER

Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.
—Psalm 27:10:5

Unfortunately, not everyone has had a positive experience with their father. Deadbeat dads walk out on their families, offering only neglect instead of care. Some children have never met their fathers. Or, worse, some wish they had never met them. Sadly, our world is plagued with poor examples of fathers, men who abandon, neglect, or abuse their families. Your own bad experience may make it difficult to accept God as your heavenly Father.

But God's faithfulness far exceeds that of even the best parents. Even if our father and mother forsake us, the Lord will not. Our Father God is the perfect Father. He fills a painful vacuum of love for all whose earthly fathers have forsaken them.

God's intention in calling himself Father is to reveal his heart's desire to have a real relation-

ship with you, his child. He loves you in a way that no human has ever loved you, with ferocity and faithfulness that no human love can match.

If your own father has failed you, then you need, more than most, the faithful Father in your life. Do not reject the vivid image of God as your Father because your own father failed to live up to his calling. No one should be abandoned, neglected, or abused. We all need the unconditional love and affirmation of the perfect Father.

Father, thank you for calling us your own children and welcoming us into your life. Replace the pain of our broken relationships with the joy of your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

“**ABBA, FATHER**”

By [the Spirit] we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. —Romans 8:15-16

“*Abba, Father*” is a beautiful word picture that portrays the balanced relationship God desires with each of his children. Together these words capture for us the healthy balance of how children of God may view and approach the heavenly Father.

Abba is an affectionate name used by children in the Jewish culture for addressing their father; it’s similar to our word *Daddy*, communicating a sense of childlike dependence, love, and vulnerability. When we cry out, “*Abba*,” we are expressing our complete trust in and dependence on our Father God. We call God “*Abba*” because Jesus paid for our sin and removed our guilt so that we can personally approach God. The picture of a little child in Daddy’s strong arms is a portrait of our dependence on and intimacy with God himself.

Pairing “*Abba*” with “Father” helps us balance our view of God, combining *Abba* intimacy with Father respect. We are to respect God and even fear the Lord as Maker of the universe and Judge of all living things. At the same time, we are welcomed to trust and rest and find comfort in *Abba*’s tenderness as he leads us through the journey of life. Have you discovered the joy and comfort of getting to know your *Abba, Father*? It’s essential to a healthy spiritual life.

Abba, Father, thank you for expressing your love for us and inviting us into relationship with you. Help us know and enjoy all the benefits of full life with you. In Jesus, Amen.

FATHER RESPECT

Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
—Psalm 34:11

Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” The Hebrew word for “fear” in this expression refers to a loving reverence and awe of God, coupled with a willingness to obey him, knowing that he always wants what is best for us. Our relationship with the Lord is built not on terror but on appropriate respect and awe for our Father. A healthy respect and understanding of God as loving Creator, faithful Lord, and righteous Judge is the foundation of wisdom. (See also Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7.)

People who lack reverence for God are like children who do not honor their parents. They throw a tantrum to try to manipulate God into giving them what they want. When that fails, they storm off defiantly to do their own thing, ignoring the wisdom and authority of their

Father God. Of course, we are all inclined toward such childish rebellion.

On the cross Jesus paid for our sin of dishonoring God. And when we accept the gift of his death for our sin, we enter into a new and intimate relationship with the Father.

But God is not our pal. He cannot be outsmarted, used, or tricked. God is the Creator of the universe, infinite, eternal, and all knowing. The very essence of his being, though, is love (1 John 4:8). Are you growing to know your loving Father?

Help us, Father, to grow in our appreciation and honor of you. May we never lose respect for you as our Lord. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

DADDY'S EAR

"When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

—Matthew 6:6

Jesus invites his followers into an intimate love relationship with God the Father. The privilege of that intimacy might best be seen in how Jesus teaches us to pray. Though God is almighty and maintains the entire universe, he also attends to the prayers of his children.

In a democracy like the United States, most citizens think of their president as the most powerful person in the nation. Most would feel fortunate to get even a few minutes of his time. But when one of his daughters calls, if he is a good dad, he'll answer and listen. She has an ear with the president that any CEO or political leader would envy. She is one who can call him "Daddy." Her agenda is not national security or some international crisis. Her access is based on the fact that he is her loving father, who always cares

for her and wants what is best for her.

With us, God wants a relationship that is infinitely more caring and loving. He has given his heart to us. The Son of God, Jesus, even came to be one of us and to die so that we could live forever with God. Our Father has made himself available to us anytime, anywhere. Almighty God is our loving Father, who is never too busy to hear the prayers of his beloved children. Do you have this kind of relationship with the God of the universe?

Thank you, Lord, for loving us and hearing our prayers. You are never too busy for your children. May we be as eager to pray as you are to listen and respond. Amen.

LAVISHED WITH LOVE

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!—1 John 3:1

The word *lavish* presents a picture of extravagant abundance. It is almost too much, too generous and luxurious. Being lavish borders on being wasteful. But the Father has lavished his love on us. God's love is even more than what a wonderful mother showers on her infant. God's love and care are supplied all the time. God's love is a constant bombardment of affection and care. We may be as oblivious as an infant to the presence of his love, but God still continues to pour his love into our lives.

God's love flows into us deeply and redefines who we are at the very core of our soul. When we open our hearts to God's love, we are transformed by it. We are remade, regenerated into children of God.

It is God who makes us his children, not us. We cannot earn

that status. It is a gift of God's great love. Because we are sinners, we don't understand God's love for us at first. We don't even know we need him until we realize we are stuck in sin and cannot save ourselves. We become God's children when we receive Jesus as our Savior (John 1:12).

Not one of us is worthy of God's love. We cannot earn it. God just loves us. We would not be God's children if he were not already deeply in love with us.

How amazing is that!

Father God, may we have the power to grasp how wide and deep and high and long is your love for us, expressed in all that Jesus has done for us, that we may be your children. In his name, Amen.

LOVE ALWAYS

[Love] always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.
—1 Corinthians 13:7-8

Real love never quits. God's love is timeless and constant. It is "always" there, without fail. Psalm 103:17 says, "From everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children." "Everlasting" and "always" are wide open words that expand our limited view of God's love.

God's love is not fickle or wavering, because it does not depend on anything other than God's own decision to love. If God's love were merely a response to our love or a reward for our good behavior, it would fluctuate wildly and at times disappear entirely. Fortunately, though, God's love is deeply rooted in his own faithfulness and character, not in our limited commitment or our temperamental love.

Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's love. He died for us "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8). When we were at our worst, he offered us his best.

Though I love my kids even on their naughtiest days, God loves us even more constantly and without condition. God's love does not waver. It is a constant presence in our lives. God's love originates and flows from his own character. The greatest blessing and perhaps the only constant in the universe is the mighty force of God's love.

Do you know this love?

Father, thank you for your unending love. May your love define us as your children, and may we return it to you and offer it to others in Jesus' name. Amen.

THE MOTHER LOVE OF GOD

"As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you."

—Isaiah 66:13

I visited a couple whose son had just been sentenced to five years in prison. The father was deeply disappointed; his son was a lost cause in his eyes. The mother wept. Her son was a good boy who had made a mistake. She had hope for his future.

There is often a tenderness in a mother's love that is sometimes missing from a father's. As Israel was serving hard time in exile, they needed to know that God's love has a tender side. They thought God had forsaken them. God responded by using the image of a mother nursing her infant. "Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" declared the Lord. It is outrageous to imagine a caring mother forgetting her own newborn child. It is even more unthinkable to imagine God forgetting his own children.

In fact, we are engraved onto God's hands. We are like an

open wound on the hand of God, unforgettable, always before his eyes. Surely this is a picture of what Jesus endured for our sake. After dying on the cross and rising on Easter, Jesus showed his followers the nail holes in his hands as evidence of who he is and of the love he has given (Luke 24:37-39; John 20:26-29). We are engraved as scars on Jesus' hands. The scars are a reminder of God's incredible love for us, more tender than even a mother's love for her nursing baby.

We are comforted by your tender love, Lord, knowing that you will never leave or forsake us. May we celebrate your faithful care and loving nurture today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THE PRODIGAL FATHER

Where sin increased, grace increased all the more.

—Romans 5:20

Parables are stories Jesus told to help us learn how to live as God's children. He used common subjects from farming and family life to teach about his Father and life in his kingdom.

Though we often refer to this story as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," it could be called "The Parable of the Prodigal Father." We may think that "prodigal" refers to sinful, rebellious, or wayward behavior. But it actually means "wasteful in a reckless way; extremely generous, lavish." The term may describe the rebellious son's wild living, but it also describes the father's lavish love. This parable is about our Father's character and how his generous love operates in a world full of wayward children.

At every turn in the story the father's response is totally unexpected. He honors the outrageous request of the younger

son and gives him his inheritance. The father's love is so recklessly generous that it allows for rebellion. And later, instead of rejecting the son who rejected him, the prodigal father watches and waits for his eventual return. And when the son finally returns home, the father showers him with gifts and a banquet.

Jesus wants us to know without a doubt that his Father's love is abundantly prodigal, and that when we repent and return home, our Father, with all of heaven, is ready to celebrate!

Have you experienced the Father's lavish love in your life?

Father, we have wandered from your love. Turn us from our sinful, rebellious ways to receive your embrace. In Jesus, Amen.

ORPHANED BY SIN

"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

—John 14:18

Sin makes orphans of us all. Sin shatters the relationship we were meant to have with our Father God. Sin is rebellion against the God who loves us, saying, in effect, like the younger son in Jesus' parable (Luke 15:11-32), "Father, I wish you were dead so that I can have my inheritance now and do whatever I want." Sin always leaves us lost in a strange land, spiritually starving, lonely, and dying.

The good news is that our Father is alive. He loves us. He wants us in his life. Like a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, like a woman searching every nook and cranny in her house for her lost coin, the Father orchestrates life so that we encounter powerful expressions of his unconditional love. His aim is to adopt us back into his family.

God has a deep compassion for orphans (Deuteronomy 10:18). God does not abandon spiritual orphans, not even in a mess of our own making. He intervenes. He redeems us from the desperate poverty of our own sin. Jesus offers hope to each one of us. Unlike the older brother in the parable (Luke 15:28), our brother Jesus leaves home to seek and save us. He paid for our freedom and returns us to our Father's house. Sin drives us from the Father's presence, but never beyond the reach of his love.

Father, we confess that we have sinned against you and are no longer worthy to be called your children. Thank you for your grace that forgives all our sin and welcomes us home. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE FATHER'S COMPASSION

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him."
—Luke 15:20

Compassion arises from an understanding of the limitations and struggles of another person. When a baby dumps her bowl of cereal on the kitchen floor, we have compassion because she knows nothing about gravity. Our reaction is quite different when our twelve-year-old does the same thing. Parents adjust expectations to their child's developmental level.

As we have compassion on our children, so our Creator, who knows all our limitations, has compassion on us. We are not flawless people. We are not masters of our own destiny. Our abilities are not limitless. God knows we are dust, and because of his frank and accurate assessment of our human condition, he is filled with compassion. God knows we will fail. God will not condone rebellion or excuse wicked behavior, but

he has genuine compassion and is therefore quick to forgive.

Jesus' ministry centered on compassion. He was moved to help the weak and helpless. That compassion led Jesus to the cross to save us in our hopeless state.

When Scripture says, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities," it almost makes God sound unfair. We deserve death but get life.

"Not fair" is the definition of God's grace, compassion, and mercy—all qualities of his perfect love. Aren't you glad that God doesn't treat us fairly?

*"Praise the LORD, my soul."
O God, thank you for
your compassion, love,
and grace. Amen.*

GRACE OR NOTHING

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.
—Ephesians 2:8-9

The wayward son has a speech prepared that includes an offer to work to repay his debt. The father allows his son to confess his sin and accept the consequences of his sin. Owning up to our sin and the damage it causes is a vital part of true repentance.

But the father interrupts the son before he can make any offer of amends, before the son can try to work his way back into the father's favor by offering himself as a hired hand.

For lost sinners, grace is the only possible option. It's grace or nothing. There is simply nothing the son could ever do or say that could make up for the pain of his blatant rebellion. Likewise, there is nothing we can do to win back the favor of our Father. Our rebellion against our Father God is so scandalous that we can do

nothing to earn his favor. The only thing we can do is receive the gift of complete forgiveness through Jesus and come home.

No matter how far you have wandered or how much you have squandered from the Father, it is safe to come home. Jesus has paid the price for your sin. He died, rose again, ascended into heaven, and is interceding for you and me before the Father. And God is eager to lavish the full measure of his grace on you. Have you received his grace?

Thank you, Father, for the free gift of our salvation, bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus. We receive your grace and want to live as your children. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FULL RESTORATION

"A slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever."
—John 8:35

The depth of God's grace is startling. He is not a reluctant forgiver, stingy with grace. God is eager to wipe the slate clean of sin and fully restore his lost children. In the parable of the lost son, everything the father does from the moment he sees his son returning is a clear sign of not only forgiveness but also complete restoration.

The father interrupts his wayward son's speech by saying, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet." All these things are signs of full restoration to the family. The son will not become a slave, a servant, or a hired worker. He will live with the father as his son, with all of the inherent privileges of being part of the family. The son is welcomed back to the family not as a slave or a hired worker but as a fully restored son.

The guilt and shame of our childish rebellion was transferred to Jesus on the cross. He provided the way out for us. By his suffering and death for our sake, we are spared the sentence of death for our sin and offered forgiveness—full and free. When we receive Christ as our Savior, we become fully restored as children of God. Jesus was crucified with open arms because the Father's arms are wide open, waiting for us to come home.

Your grace, O Lord, is amazing. Thank you for restoring our souls and crediting the righteousness of Christ to us so that we can be restored as your children. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF LOST

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.
—Romans 3:23-24

Let's take time today to think about the older son in this parable. This son never leaves the family farm or breaks any rules, but he breaks the father's heart. While the father celebrates the restoration of his younger son, the older son's heart simmers with anger and bitterness. The father goes out to his older son and tries to reason with him.

Our view of sin can be too limited. We label the younger son as a sinner while the older son strikes us as a deserving saint, the kind of hardworking person God would be pleased with and would want us to be like.

That was Jesus' second main point in this story. Everyone thought that God wanted people to be like the teachers of the law and the Pharisees—"good," hardworking people.

But grace is unearned favor. The Pharisees lived often graceless lives, so focused on rules that they no longer experienced the Father's love. They kept all kinds of rules but broke God's heart in their judgmentalism of others.

The older son is just as much a sinner as the younger, and the prodigal Father offers him the same grace. Jesus died for all kinds of sinners.

If you are slaving away for God's favor, come inside, accept the gift of Christ, and celebrate grace. There is plenty of room at the banquet for you!

Forgive us, Lord, when we turn religion into rules instead of a relationship with you. Fill us with your forgiveness and love for everyone. In Jesus, Amen.

NOTHING SECOND BEST

You are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir. —Galatians 4:7

Some versions of the Bible use the words “a son” instead of “God’s child” in Galatians 4:7. While it does not seem right today to say that all Christians are “sons” of God, that word captured the value of our inheritance as God’s children for people of the first century. At that time people lived in a culture of extreme inequality. Women were often considered property with little or no personal rights. Men and boys, on the other hand, had all the rights and privileges. A son spent time with his father, learned from him, and was expected to grow up and be like him. In a world where as many as one third of the people were slaves, a son was free. A son was an heir and could expect an inheritance.

When Galatians 4:5 says that in Christ “we might receive adoption to sonship,” it was Paul’s

way of telling Christians, men and women alike, that there is nothing second best about being a child of God or our future inheritance in Christ. Sonship is the very best position possible, a relationship with the Father full of both love and privilege. The liberating good news is that if you are in Christ, then, regardless of your race, economic status, or gender, you are a child of God and an heir to his kingdom.

Thank you, Lord, for giving us the very best, for clothing us in Christ and giving us the rights of being your children. Knowing that, may we live with true joy and confidence. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

LOVE RETURNED

We love because he first loved us.

—1 John 4:19

When my wife and I brought each of our children home for the first time, we were already hopelessly in love with them. They needed us in order to survive, but it seemed that they did not know who we were. We changed their diapers, fed them, and kept them safe—all the while showing them our love. We did not do all this to manipulate them into loving us or doing things our way. We did it simply because of the deep love we have for them.

God is love. God's love for us is also not a gimmick to win our love or get us to be good little children who obey his rules. God simply loves us.

Initially we might not recognize our Father or his love. Ultimately, however, we cannot remain passive in this love relationship; we must not remain spiritual babies. We have

a responsibility in this relationship to receive God's love (John 1:12-13) and return that love. Accepting Jesus as the Father's ultimate expression of love is at the heart of becoming an adopted child of God.

As we begin to grasp the depth and width of God's love, it becomes virtually impossible for us just to greet God with a blank stare of indifference.

When we begin to understand how tirelessly our Father God loves us, how can we not love him in return?

Father, open my eyes to your love, to the constant presence of your care in my life. May the abundance of your love create in me that same love—for you and for all others around me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

RECEIVING THE KINGDOM LIKE CHILDREN

“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”
—Mark 10:15

The scene in our reading today is not just a sentimental picture of Jesus hugging children. This is a radical statement about the kingdom of God. To the scheming adults who are debating divorce and trying to test him, Jesus points out that they should consider the children who have just approached him. Unless you receive the kingdom of God like they do, he warns, you will remain outside of it.

These words of Jesus pack a punch that should shock us when we hear them. Are adults not welcome in the kingdom of God?

Jesus is not saying that only children are welcome in God's kingdom, but he makes clear that we must receive the kingdom of God with childlike trust, wonder, joy, and love.

If you want to be a part of the kingdom of God, then come to Jesus. There is no other way to enter God's kingdom than by coming to Jesus. Stop standing at a safe distance. While a crowd of people hang back and question Jesus or listen to him teach, it is only the children who approach Jesus and linger in his presence. They are not interested in debating Jesus or in luring him into a trap. Their agenda is simply Jesus.

The good news of salvation is that if we come to God through Jesus, he will always and completely accept us.

Father, we want to live eternally in your kingdom. Grant us the simple faith to trust you and to embrace the forgiveness and acceptance you offer us in Christ Jesus. In his name, Amen.

CHILDLIKE FAITH

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

—1 Corinthians 1:27

A childlike faith is vital for living in the kingdom of God. The Pharisees had complicated their faith with elaborate answers to simple questions. The rich young man was trying to bargain with God in order to hoard his wealth. In this world of scheming and rationalizing, children approached Jesus with simple faith.

If God's kingdom were about religion and rules, Jesus would have told the children to become like the Pharisees. Instead, the Pharisees are told to become like the children because the kingdom of God centers on a relationship.

Faith is not primarily intellectual. It is a childlike act of trusting in Jesus. The Christian faith is not contained in volumes of theology or intricate religious rules. It is just the simple reality that "Jesus loves me; this I

know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong; they are weak but he is strong."

It really is that simple. The more we complicate our faith, the greater the danger that we will become legalistic like the Pharisees. The greater our wealth and position, the greater the danger that we will make idols of these things instead of following Jesus. There is no other way to live and thrive in God's kingdom than with a childlike faith in Jesus.

What is your faith like?

Thank you, Father, for letting us be your children, for accepting us when we come to you. Help us to live with a childlike trust in Jesus every day. Amen.

RECKLESS CONFIDENCE

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.
—1 John 4:18

My daughter loved jumping into the swimming pool before she could swim. I spent many hours catching her as she hurled herself into the water with wild abandon. In one sense her behavior was completely reckless, jumping into a situation that could end her life. In reality, there was no risk at all. I would do anything to ensure her safety. Perfect love drives out fear. She trusted that her life was secure in my hands, so she played with the kind of reckless confidence that should inspire us all.

That same reckless faith allowed Peter to get out of a boat and walk on water toward Jesus. It is the faith that allows Christians to live boldly against the norms and values of their surrounding culture in order to serve Jesus more faithfully. It is the faith of missionaries who

leave the securities of home to bring the gospel to an unfamiliar place, sometimes far away.

Though we may find it hard to jump in over our heads, we must. If we cower in fear instead of jumping recklessly into the Father's hands, we miss out on growing stronger in faith, trusting that God's hands will always support us as we follow his leading. Our faith grows and our fear shrinks every time we jump and experience the faithful support of God's ready hands.

Lord, give us the faith to get out of the boat of our own security and to trust in you. May our faith grow as we follow you beyond our personal comfort zone. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FATHER KNOWS BEST

“When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans . . . for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

—Matthew 6:7-8

Good fathers express the faithfulness of their love by caring for their children. I would skip meals rather than see my daughters go hungry. Caring for my children is one of my highest priorities.

Even more, however, God meets our needs better than we possibly can. God always seeks our best interests, and, since he is all-knowing, our Father really does know what is best for us. God also has the power to accomplish more than we could ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). In our shortsightedness we sometimes think we know better than God and ask for things that would ultimately unravel our lives. We even get angry when the Father fails to give us what we ask for, though he instead provides what is beneficial for us. Thank God for his perfect Father-care over our

lives, even when we fail to understand why he allows some events and prevents others from happening.

Jesus let go of his own desires and submitted to the Father’s plan (Luke 22:42). Jesus trusted that his death was necessary in God’s perfect plan.

As we pray, we need not tell God what his will is for our lives; we simply need to surrender to his perfect will and thank him for his constant care. Like all good parents, our Father God desires nothing but the best for his children.

Father, may we have the vision to see your will unfolding in our lives and the faith to trust in your goodness when our vision fails. In Jesus, Amen.

GLORIOUS FREEDOM

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

—Galatians 5:1

In Romans 8, Paul uses the phrase “the freedom and glory of the children of God” to refer to both the present reality of God’s children and a future in which hope becomes realized and suffering is only a distant memory. This glorious freedom is based on our relationship to our Father God as his children.

The opportunity of being God’s child, as opposed to being a servant or slave, is an invitation to a life of freedom. God’s forgiven children are free from the condemnation of sin (Romans 8:1-2). The power of canceled sin means that hell no longer has a claim on our soul. We are free from sin and its eternal condemnation.

We are free from slavery to sin as well, free to serve God joyfully. Complete freedom is the ability to do whatever we want to do. This freedom occurs

when our hearts have been so changed by God that we follow the Holy Spirit and actually desire to do what pleases the Father. Genuine freedom involves doing what we were designed to do, being who we were created to be.

The wonderful combination of freedom and glory is the norm for believers who have experienced the radical forgiveness of grace through Christ and are eager to serve together with fellow sons and daughters of God in the Father’s kingdom.

We praise you, O God, for the redemption and freedom of our souls. Help us to use our freedom to be Christlike in serving you and others. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

ADOPTED INTO THE FAMILY

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."

—Romans 8:15

Salvation is a homecoming, God's act of adopting spiritual orphans into his eternal family. Sonship refers to our adoption as children of God. The life-transforming grace and love of adoption is what makes the Christian faith so unique and full of joy.

Jesus paid the price for our adoption, giving us the right to be children of God (John 1:12). We are not born naturally into this relationship; it is a spiritual rebirth. Jesus calls it being "born again," "born of the Spirit" (John 3:3, 8). While adoption is a legal contract that completely transforms the status of a child, it is more importantly a profound expression of parental love.

For reasons that can be summarized only by love itself, God chose you. He selected you to be his child and adopted you

into his family. The idea of being chosen is simply that God's love makes us children of God. Nothing else—no works, merit, or righteousness on our part—can do it. Both our existence as human beings and our salvation are ultimately dependent on one thing: the love of God the Father. And through the sacrifice of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—which we celebrate today—we become fully renewed children of God!

How do you feel, knowing that God chose you?

Lord, words cannot express our gratitude for the new life you give. Thank you for real life in Jesus by your Spirit! Amen.

ORCHESTRATING LOVE

In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.

—Ephesians 1:4-5

The human act of adoption is a beautiful act of love, but it is also a lot of work. Adoption involves forms, home visits, government permission, and a list of expensive fees.

Adopting a child is a complicated and costly process for our Father as well. It takes time, effort, and continuous planning. Our homecoming is the result of orchestrating countless moving parts throughout the course of our lives.

Today's verses contain strong verbs declaring that God orchestrates all things to accomplish his purposes. Our Father God is the initiator of this relationship. Jesus the Son pays the price for our adoption. And the Spirit acts as our agent, working out the details in our hearts and lives to guarantee our adoption into the family of God.

Orchestrating describes the work of a great conductor who takes countless moving parts and creates one harmonious, beautiful result. In his sovereignty God orchestrates a world in which billions of people are going every which way, and he turns it into the harmony of his own will. God conducts a cosmic orchestra in such a way that the symphony of his love touches the hearts of his children.

Our adoption is sealed when we receive the ultimate expression of the Father's love in Jesus through his Spirit. What an amazing process!

Thank you, Father, for loving us enough to work out the details of our salvation. May we appreciate your amazing work in our lives each day. Amen!

THE FAMILY NAME

“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” —Matthew 5:16

When you are part of a family, you represent that family. People who meet you will make assumptions about your parents, your children, and your siblings. I have three brothers. If one of them is rude, self-centered, and vulgar, you might assume that all of us boys are just as unpleasant to be around. If you meet someone from my family who is kind and loving, then hopefully you will reason that we are all like that.

As children of God, we represent the family of God, whether we are aware of it or not. The world will judge our Father based on our words, behaviors, and attitudes. Jesus challenges his followers to let their light shine into the world's spiritual darkness. Our deeds, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, will reflect an image of the Father that others will see.

If you are a Christian, you bear the name of Christ. You represent Jesus wherever you go. The Bible goes as far as to call us “Christ’s ambassadors” to the world. Christ is making his appeal to the world through us. He sends us to share his transforming love with our neighbors, friends, relatives, coworkers—everyone we encounter on any given day. We carry the family name of Jesus wherever we go, whatever we do.

How well do you carry the name of Jesus?

Lord, may all who are living in darkness be drawn to you through the goodness shining from our lives. Give us strength and wisdom to live with integrity for your sake. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FOLLOWING GOD'S EXAMPLE

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us.

—Ephesians 5:1-2

Paul calls his fellow Christians to imitate God in order to live up to the reputation of God's family. He challenges believers to "walk in the way of love," as Christ did.

This is about loving the way Jesus loved. And Jesus always acted in line with the Father's will. The love of Jesus embraced outcasts, pardoned sinners, healed the hopeless, challenged the complacent, and willingly sacrificed everything so that we sinners could be reconciled with God. Sacrificial love is our most visible and defining family trait.

The only reason we are in the family of God in the first place is because of God's extravagant love. As Paul calls us to imitate God's love, he reminds us that we are defined by it—we are "dearly loved children."

Our own love emerges from the depths of that eternal love. Our love is an overflow of the love God has personally shown to each of us. Love is the DNA test that determines paternity with our Father God (1 John 4:7-8). God loves you because you are his child, and you are his child because he loves you. Children of God are caught up into the infinite circle of God's love.

We are most like our Father, most godly, when we allow that love to flow from us into the lives of others.

Lord, grant us the love to serve others with such selfless devotion that our kindness will help transform their lives and draw them to Jesus, the source of all love. In his name we pray. Amen.

LOVING DISCIPLINE

[Our human fathers] disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.
—Hebrews 12:10

Because our Father's love is perfectly balanced, it includes discipline. He intervenes to drive us from sin toward righteousness the way I used to steer my toddlers from the road back into our yard. Though I may have sounded severe, I was not angry or vindictive; I just wanted to protect them. Eventually our kids understood the dangers of the roadway and discovered the fun of playing safely in our yard.

Just as we steer our children away from disaster—sometimes by force—so a loving Father actively disciplines his children. I do not discipline children who are not mine. I will intervene if they are going to hurt themselves, but their long-term development is their parents' responsibility.

Discipline is one of the signs of love and belonging. My kids

know I love them because I intervene when they misbehave. They may not like the immediate consequences, but over time they understand it's all in their best interest.

God's purpose in discipline is to bring us to a place where we recognize our sin as ugly rebellion that will ultimately destroy us—and then we can quit running away from the Father and walk with him in joyful obedience. The process might be painful at first, but it is a confirmation of God's love.

Father, we confess that we have sinned against you and wandered from your love and truth. Thank you for not abandoning us in our rebellion. Thank you for your love and pardon. Amen.

OUR GLORIOUS INHERITANCE

If we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

—Romans 8:17

Glory seems like a vague description, but it is the single word that best captures our future as children of God. Though the details of this inheritance are not made clear to us, what is certain is that all of God's children are heirs together with Christ of a glorious future.

That glorious future is depicted briefly in Revelation 21 like a movie trailer meant to tease our curiosity. In our skewed priorities we tend to focus on streets of gold and gates of pearl. But the image in Revelation 21 that should capture our imaginations is not precious jewels but the priceless relationship we are promised with God. "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them." The greatest treasure is that the distinction between heaven and earth will disappear, God and

humanity will live together in heavenly perfection. There will be no more separation from the Father, no more wandering from home rejecting God's perfect love. We were created to know God as he knows us.

This sneak preview of heaven reveals that this relationship will finally be complete. The vital relationship between our Father God and all his children is the crown jewel of this new and glorious reality.

Father, our souls long for the day when our faith will be sight. Thank you for these glimpses of glory in your Word. May we live with expectant joy as we await that day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WORTH THE WAIT

Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.
—Hebrews 11:1

If we are alert, we can sometimes see glimpses of heaven in our everyday living. I have been to wedding receptions where the bride and groom are a match made in heaven, where the music stirs my soul, and the food and drinks are divine. These are unique events in which we understand that the unconditional love of marriage should prompt a great celebration. We capture such moments on video because we know that in this lifetime they are rare and fleeting. They seem like foretastes of heaven, whetting our appetite for the real thing. Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a wedding banquet because these events reveal scenes of heavenly delight.

Most of the days of our lives are not like heaven on earth. Often life is hard, and we face difficult struggles. But if we are clothed

in Christ, we can anticipate the eternal wedding feast.

The Bible's descriptions of the new heaven and new earth are like a menu that aims to describe what must finally be smelled, tasted, and consumed to be understood and appreciated. Heaven-like moments in life are like tiny appetizers handed out as we wait in the rain to get a table at a fine restaurant. Both give hope to tired legs and empty stomachs. The intent is to assure us that the wait is worthwhile.

In hope, let's serve our Lord here on earth as we wait for eternal joy in heaven!

Father, thank you for the joy of heavenly moments in this life and the promise of heaven in the next. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WELCOME HOME

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms.” —John 14:1-2

There’s no place like home. Returning from a mission trip to Asia, I was greeted by a huge paper banner with brightly colored letters saying “Welcome Home, Daddy!” Home is more than a street address and familiar surroundings. Home is a place of belonging, where you can be yourself and know you are loved and accepted.

The Bible is a long love song about the Father calling his children home. He has a gracious heart overflowing with love for his lost children. He has chosen you from even before the time of creation for adoption into his family (Ephesians 1:4). God’s revealing himself as our Father is an offer of his love to all of humanity.

If you humble yourself and turn toward home, the Father will meet you right where you are. He has arranged for the full

payment of your sin. Once in his arms, you are as good as home.

Walking with him, with our brother Jesus, and with all the redeemed children of God, we move toward the feast that celebrates the fact that we were lost but are now found, were dead but are now alive again.

Are you ready to celebrate at the great feast of the kingdom of God? Turn your heart toward the Father and accept his welcome to your true home.

Father, thank you for your endless love and overwhelming grace. We receive your forgiveness and respond to your offer of new life with you and great joy for ever and ever, in Jesus’ name! Amen.

june

Living Under Water

Kevin Adams

What is baptism? Is it more something we do, or something we are? What might it mean to define yourself as someone “baptized”? What if baptism is experienced as a lifelong participation in God’s great, true story told since the dawn of creation? What might change if we experienced baptism as a sign of deep, lifelong belonging to the bewilderingly diverse people of “one baptism”?

Kevin Adams will help us to answer questions like these this month. And it is our prayer that if you don’t know Jesus as your Savior and Lord, these words will stir you to search deep inside and to find a community (church) or a pastor who can help you along the road to knowing Jesus.

Kevin Adams is the author of 150: Finding Your Story in the Psalms and The Book That Understands You. In 1991 Kevin and his wife, Gerry, planted Granite Springs Church, a congregation that has helped to inspire a movement of church planting in the Sacramento, California, area. Kevin serves as senior pastor at Granite Springs, as director of the Church Planting Center at the Newbigin House of Studies in San Francisco, California, and as a teacher at Calvin Theological Seminary and William Jessup University.

SPECIAL JOY

Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

—Matthew 3:13

Each baptism brings special joy. One Sunday our congregation baptized three generations of the same family—a grandfather, a father, and a son. On another Sunday we baptized Andy, who, after attending church for six years, after wondering and exploring, eventually said, “I believe, and I want to be baptized.” On yet another Sunday we baptized Jeanette, who, at 86 years old, was the oldest person I had ever baptized. And there was Carla, an elegant woman of fine taste who was baptized in a giant feeding trough in our sanctuary. As usual, we baptized her in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

When I led a church in Minnesota, we baptized one of our deacons. Typically people are baptized well before they become church leaders. But he had assumed that, like his older

siblings, he was baptized as a child. One day over an extended family dinner he learned that his parents were “between churches” when he was young, and they actually never got around to having him baptized.

Thousands of churches around the world consider the story of Jesus’ baptism every year. That helps people reflect on their own baptism. Maybe you were baptized because of your own decision. Or maybe your parents presented you for baptism. What might change if we thought of baptism as the defining reality of our life?

Father, thank you for your deep love and for including us in Jesus’ baptism. Whether our baptism is in the past or the future, we ask that it be to us a sign of your grace. Amen.

ALL DONE

“Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”
—Matthew 3:15

Baptism was common in Jesus’ day as a form of “ritual cleansing” with water. We can imagine in the Middle East—a place where water is rare and dust is everywhere—people might associate “cleansing” with meeting God. In those days many folks were “washed” in ritual cleansing. Everyone, it seemed, knew about baptism.

But John the Baptizer introduced a radical emphasis: baptism wasn’t merely a ritual but required a change of heart. Baptism, he said, was for repentance, and everyone needed it. Everyone needed to leave past regrets and sins behind. Some had to turn away from doing whatever they liked. Others needed to turn from self-righteous rule-following. John offered specific repentance action steps for everyone.

But on the day Jesus came to him, John, whose fierce style

often puzzled people, was taken aback. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” John wondered (Matthew 3:14). And we might too: *How could the sinless one be baptized with a baptism of repentance?* Jesus said it was right to do this “to fulfill all righteousness.” In all he said and did, Jesus revealed God’s righteousness.

Jesus didn’t need to repent; he was baptized to identify with us as our brother and Savior. His baptism anticipated his death and resurrection, and it symbolized our release from sin and misery. It began our liberation.

Jesus, thank you for doing everything needed to save us. We stand amazed that you would consider yourself our brother and Savior. Amen.

A LAMB

"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

—John 1:29

One rainy February I visited Israel. Fellow pilgrims and I were amazed to see places we had read about for decades: the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem. One afternoon, with countless other tourists, our bus stopped at the Jordan, the river where John baptized Jesus. The tour brochure stated that if we liked, we could get baptized in the Jordan. Having already been baptized, I knew that my baptism was sufficient (and the Jordan is certainly not magical). And on that cold, drizzly day beside the murky Jordan, everyone on our bus agreed: "No, thanks." Other groups were being baptized, however. Dressed in white robes, they were plunged into the muddy water, and they rose soaked and mud-stained.

Imagine Jesus immersed in that river. Dale Bruner, a wise Bible

commentator and missionary, calls this event "Jesus' first miracle" because in it Jesus identifies with sinners, a fitting beginning to a life of serving needy, broken people.

We might think Jesus should appear less vulnerable and more imposing. John wanted Jesus to preach with fiery images more arresting than his own. But Jesus declined. Instead he waited wordlessly in the baptism line, entered the baptismal waters, and then was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness (Matthew 4:1). Jesus held back. He was silent. Like a lamb.

Jesus, we know your humility saves. We are tempted by power, by control—and often we want to dominate. Let us trust your baptismal gentleness. In your name we pray. Amen.

TORN OPEN

Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

—Mark 1:10

The gospel of Mark uses a powerful verb to make a point. The heavens were “torn open.” At Jesus’ baptism God rips open heaven and pours out his favor and blessing. He showers his love upon the world.

Ask Protestants to cite a verse on baptism, and most will think immediately of “The Great Commission,” where Jesus says, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . .” (Matthew 28:19), but wise early church leaders taught that the key to understanding baptism is the passage about Jesus’ own baptism. For example, John Chrysostom (A.D. 347-407) asked, “Why were the heavens opened?” And he answered: “To inform you that at your baptism this is also done.”

At Christ’s baptism and ours, God rips heaven open and pours out his grace. It’s an

amazing thought. We can have his peace. We can know his joy. We can live out his gentleness. We can commune with him in prayer. God comes to us with amazing grace and full favor. The blessings of heaven are available to all of us who are united with Christ in baptism.

There’s an old, mistaken understanding of baptism that says, “I should postpone my baptism, because if afterward I sin, I’ll be in trouble.” But the good news of this text is that baptism isn’t about us at all. It’s about God ripping open heaven and pouring out grace. Thank God!

Father, thank you for pouring on us your grace and love and all the other blessings of heaven. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

OUT OF REACH?

“Has no one condemned you?”

—John 8:10

Baptism can seem ordinary. Most baptisms don't include much glitz or obvious dramatic power, as we might expect with miracles.

But in every baptism the beauty and grace of the holy Trinity is fully present. In each event we hear the Father's voice over a beloved child issuing a new decree of adoption, saying, in effect, “This one too is received into my family.” In each event the Spirit of peace and wholeness descends to give an ordinary human grace. Through his baptism Jesus accepts sinners. No one is too far gone. No one is out of his reach, shamed, or singled out.

The fascinating Reformation leader Martin Luther said that every morning Christians should wake up and remind themselves, “I am baptized!” It's no wonder he also added,

“Practically all the Scriptures point to the baptism of Christ.”

John the Baptist wanted Jesus' ministry to feature fire and judgment. And there is some of that—mostly aimed at self-righteous religious people. But most of Jesus' ministry is far different from what John or any of us might imagine. The Holy Spirit comes—as a dove. What a contrast to our own condemning assessments of people around us. In baptism, in his kind words to sinners, Jesus claims us as his own and brings us home.

Lord, we want to see you. And often we want to see you in power and majesty and strength. Help us to look for you in gentleness and humility. In your name we pray. Amen.

ACCEPTED

"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

—Matthew 3:17

Thomas Long tells the following story in a sermon:

"A well-known theologian once confessed that he was plagued for many nights by a terrible dream. He dreamt that he was traveling in a distant city and that he ran into someone with whom he had gone to high school. In the dream, the person would say, 'Henri, Henri, I haven't seen you in years. What have you done with your life?' This question always felt like a judgment. Henri had done some good things in his life, but there had also been some troubles and struggles. And when the old schoolmate in the dream said, 'What have you done with your life?' Henri didn't know what to say, how to account for his life.

"Then one night he had another dream. He dreamt that he died and went to heaven.

He was waiting . . . to stand before almighty God, and he shivered with fear. He was convinced that God would be surrounded with fire and smoke and speak with a deep voice saying, 'Henri, Henri, what have you done with your life?' But when the door to God's throne room opened, the room was filled with light. From the room he could hear God speaking to him in a gentle voice saying, 'Henri, it's good to see you. I hear you had a rough trip, but I'd love to see your slides.'"

Baptism reminds us that God saves. It's not up to us. And what a comfort that is!

Father, whisper over us your baptism promise: "This is my child, in whom I am well pleased." In Jesus, Amen.

ANOINTED

He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.
—Matthew 3:16

A young boy reflected on the baptism he saw one Sunday morning during a worship service. His family was driving home afterward, and this brother of the child who had been baptized began to cry in the back seat. He continued all the way home. Three times his dad asked him what was wrong. Finally, the boy blurted out, “The preacher said he wanted us to be brought up in a *Christian* home, but I want to stay with you guys!”

Those who are baptized struggle like everyone else to be decent people. We are tempted like everyone else to be less than God created us to be, but in Jesus, God gives us spiritual power to choose a better way.

Jesus’ baptism was his “ordination” into public ministry. He was forever God’s much-loved Son. But his baptism launched

his earthly ministry. In the same way, baptism launches our ministry too. It is, in a very real way, our ordination service. In our baptism the Holy Spirit pledges his presence in our lives. We now live the rest of our lives inside the promise that his heavenly strength enables us to live and work for God’s pleasure.

John Chrysostom said the dove at Jesus’ baptism appears to point out that this was God’s Son, and it teaches us also “that upon you no less at your baptism the Spirit comes.”

Father, most of the time we seriously underestimate the gifts you give us in baptism. Help us to receive them, and to put them into practice. In Jesus’ name and the Spirit’s power, Amen.

WHY ARE YOU THE WAY YOU ARE?

“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked.

—Matthew 21:23

Clarence Jordan wrote an “interpretation” of the Bible called *The Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John*, telling the story of Jesus as if he lived in modern-day Georgia. In a musical adaptation by Tom Key and Russell Treyz, who called it *The Cotton Patch Gospel*, Tom Key stood on a ladder onstage, playing the part of God. The actor playing the recently baptized Jesus stood below him, looking up with hope and a bit of anxiety. But he needn’t have worried. God speaks in a voice loud enough to be heard all through Atlanta: “You are my boy, Jesus. I am so proud of you!”

One listener remembers she could feel in the marrow of her bones the exuberant love and approval in the actor’s voice. Something like that happens between God and us in our own baptism: “This one

is mine!” the Lord exclaims. “I see my image in her! And here comes my Spirit to sustain and guide as you go about doing what I put you on earth to do.”

At Jesus’ baptism God spoke to him so that all could hear: “You are my beloved Son” And in our baptism God the Father says, “You are my beloved child” We are adopted into God’s family through Christ. Our baptism is our ordination, and it is also our adoption. We are brought into God’s family. We get the same blessing as Jesus, from the same Father!

Father, let us hear your voice saying that we are your children. Help us to realize how much you love us. In Jesus, Amen.

WHEN AND WHERE AND HOW?

Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel . . .

—1 Corinthians 1:17

Len doesn't remember his baptism. It took place when he was a few months old. His parents had left their church because of an ugly disagreement between church members. They had recently begun attending another church nearby. So in this new congregation, where his family barely knew anyone, Len was baptized. Reflecting on it years later in a book on baptism, he found it more than a little ironic: a child was baptized "in the unity of the body of Christ" at one congregation because of some rather heated disunity in another church.

I remember the first baptism service at Granite Springs Church. Our church was 11 months old, meeting in a dilapidated warehouse. We began holding worship services with excitement and enthusiasm, but also with some fear and trepidation.

Would anyone come? Would anyone be changed? But on that Sunday, 23 people were baptized. Entire families were baptized together. So were adults who had never been to church before coming to Granite Springs. Toward the end of the baptismal line a mom was baptized, and then her youngest son, a model of patience. Then it came time to baptize his older brother, and he tried to make a break for it. But amid smiles he too was baptized.

Each baptism is beautiful. But what really matters isn't the when, where, or how. What's important is the gospel that baptism represents. God claims you as his own!

Lord, we are baptized into your name. Lead us past obstacles to your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

EVERYONE AND ANYONE

"Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?"
—Acts 8:36

The Christian faith is both the most inclusive and exclusive faith there is. How can that be?

Every religion has a founder. A prophet or a wise teacher informs their followers, "Here's how to get to God." Each describes a distinct way to God.

We've all heard the notion that all religions are the same, simply different paths to the top of the same mountain. That is almost true. Most religions say we need to climb our way up. Buddhism explains an eight-fold path. Hinduism teaches nine beliefs, and Islam has a prophet and five pillars.

But Christianity is different. Our leader does not say, "I'm here to show you God." Jesus says, "I *am* God." This is radically different and very exclusive. Jesus says, in effect, "I am God, and I have come to you—because

you'll never get there another way." That leaves us with two options: Christianity is either the one true faith, or it is centered on a terrible lie.

Today's reading shows this exclusivity. There is a unique *One* of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke. And Philip gladly tells about him. But this also shows the gospel's radical inclusivity. A Jewish apostle and an Ethiopian court official are both saved in the same way. Anyone (inclusive) can receive and live this (exclusive) message. Americans. Asians. Africans. Europeans. Eunuchs. Government officials. And you and me!

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thank you for breaking down barriers between people. Thank you for inviting all of us into your kingdom. Amen.

CHOSEN

"This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles . . . and to the people of Israel." —Acts 9:15

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott describes growing up in California as part of the 1960s "flower child" movement. Though her grandparents were Christian missionaries, her dad and immediate family wanted nothing to do with Christianity. She writes, "No one in our family believed in God—it was like we'd all signed some sort of loyalty oath . . . agreeing not to."

Anne came to believe in nature, books, and music, influenced mainly by her parents and their friends, who often came over to sing folk songs, smoke pot, drink a lot, and carry on extramarital affairs. She drank regularly before she was a teenager.

In high school Anne worked hard to study great atheists, aiming to prove Christians wrong, especially a teacher who had become a Christian. She

had lots of ups and downs, feeling loved and cheerful but also dealing with bulimia and bingeing on whiskey. She studied Kierkegaard and took a leap of faith, but shared, "Mine was a patchwork God, sewn together from bits of rag and ribbon . . . everything but the kitchen sink and Jesus."

One day she wandered into a small church. The singing, she said, "pulled me in and split me wide open." She realized she was becoming a Christian, and it appalled her. What would her friends think? But she couldn't hold back. Sensing Jesus' love and patience, she said to him, "All right. You can come in." Jesus had claimed her too!

Lord, thank you for showing mercy to us all. Draw us to yourself and give us new life, we pray. Amen.

EVERY NATION, TRIBE, AND PEOPLE

There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language.

—Revelation 7:9

During graduate school I found a job parking cars. A private club near campus had an extra small parking lot at their California address, so club members needed to routinely double-park their late model Jaguars and BMWs and vintage Cadillacs. After parking, they left the keys in their car. It was my job to move a car if it was blocking another car's way out.

So day after day I sat in the parking lot, soaking up sunshine in a folding chair. All the while local bankers, investment gurus, judges, and politicians met inside. I didn't think about it at first—it was a job within walking distance to my apartment and school. It was great! But the club was, at the time, male only. And, as far as I can tell, it was white only. One day protestors gathered to object that they were excluded. Big city deci-

sions were being made inside, but only certain people could enter.

Many people look at church the same way—as if it's a club for certain kinds of people. Maybe it seems reserved for “good people” or those who are “respectable” or religiously polished. If so, that means there's no room in the church for most of us.

But, thankfully, that is not true of the church of Jesus. Look closely at the picture of the church in today's verses—it includes a dazzling variety of the redeemed and baptized! The church consists of the forgiven, not the perfect!

Lord, our eyes are made blind by sin. Open them up by your love and grace. Help us to see people the way you do. Amen.

BAPTISM FOR THE SUCCESSFUL

When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.
—Acts 16:15

She was a business owner who peddled to the affluent—high-end shoppers looking for high-end products. She sold cloth dyed with the exquisite purple (crimson) for which her town had become famous. It was very chic, very flattering, very expensive.

Lydia had become prosperous. She was also “a worshiper of God,” meaning she was a Gentile seeking the God of the Bible. She was probably not married, since the story talks about her household, not her husband’s.

Though Lydia may have been moral, successful, and religious, she still needed to be saved. All successful and religious people do. And when the apostle Paul introduced her to the gospel, the good news of Jesus, God’s goodness began to work its way into Lydia’s behavior.

Maybe Lydia felt that Paul had given her the key to the entire Bible, a message too wonderful to ignore: Jesus is the fulfillment of promises made to Abraham and David. He completes the Law of Moses. Even upstanding, moral, and religious people need the gospel. So she took it in. She believed and was baptized as a symbol of her dying and rising in Christ.

Lydia was religious. Now she was free, as her baptism symbolized. She saw—and we see through her—the beauty of the gospel and the beginning of a changed life.

Father, part of us wants to be visibly successful, upstanding, moral—and religious. Help us see how desperately we need your good news. Free us through Jesus, we pray. Amen.

GOSPEL FREEDOM

"In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!"

—Acts 16:18

She was a slave, bound to men who used her to make a lot of money. They found she "had a spirit by which she predicted the future," so they used her for "fortune-telling."

Whatever that spirit was, it knew that Paul and his friends were "servants of the Most High God," and it moved her to pester the new missionaries in town. This slave girl connected with the gospel of Jesus by way of surprise. Paul grew so annoyed by her carrying on that he told the spirit to leave her "in the name of Jesus Christ." And immediately she was free—not just from her demonic master but from her human ones too. She experienced Christ's power as a gift.

Paul walked and talked the gospel, and that can bring radical change. Set free, the girl no longer fit into an exploitative

system. The gospel changed her life and upset the social balance, and that stirred up trouble for Paul and Silas.

Some people try to stuff the church into limiting categories and definitions. But the dynamic church, true to the gospel, cannot be contained. The gospel brings personal and social change. Jesus brings salvation that triumphs through losing, prospers through giving, and leads through serving. When Jesus' power comes into our life, we do not look at people or social status in the same way. We begin to see everyone and everything with Jesus' eyes of love and justice.

Jesus, you came to set captives free and care for the poor. Help us to do the same, in your name. Amen.

CHANGED

The jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. —Acts 16:33

He was a man's man, possibly a retired Roman soldier—just the type to receive a government service job as a jailer in Philippi. No doubt he was tough as nails. So what got him to wash his prisoners' wounds?

He met Jesus not through an intellectual conversation or an emotional encounter. He was a practical man without much, if any, spiritual interest.

Sitting in the Philippi prison, Paul and his fellow prisoners had just been beaten with rods, their backs a grotesque mess, oozing blood. The jailer didn't care. When they arrived, he followed his orders and put them in stocks—a kind of torture in itself, but also an extra layer of security.

But an earthquake changed everything. Doors flew open. Chains loosened. In an instant

the jailer knew he was doomed. The prisoners would run free, and he would be executed. He drew his sword to kill himself.

But no one ran. And Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" In sheer wonder the jailer "fell trembling before Paul and Silas" and asked how he could be saved.

They shared the good news of Jesus with him, possibly telling how Jesus had changed their own lives. The jailer wanted that too. So he was baptized—and his family along with him. New life comes in unexpected ways—even through suffering.

Lord, we don't want to suffer. But if we do, please help us see in our suffering a chance to speak your grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

DYING AND RISING

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
—Romans 6:3

Theologian Scott Hoezee tells of a pastor who preached a Sunday sermon about Jesus' resurrection. First thing Monday morning, the phone rang. It was a high-powered, big city lawyer who had been in church the day before. The pastor invited the man over, and as the lawyer came into the study, he said, "I have just one question for you: Do you believe that Jesus was really raised from the dead? Do you *really* believe it?" "Yes, I really do," the pastor replied. The lawyer smiled and said, "Thank you, that's all I needed to know." And he left.

Jesus really was raised from the dead. He really is still alive, and as he rules in heaven, he really is also right here with us, through the Holy Spirit, in our every act of love, kindness, grace, compassion, and hope.

Jesus lives! Because he really arose, that changes everything.

Rich got cancer a few years ago. A young grandpa, he knew his days were numbered. He grieved, knowing how much he would miss his loving wife, his step-children, and the grandson who adored his every word. Rich came to me, his pastor, and he said, "I want to be baptized." Typically in our church, people who want to be baptized attend a class explaining baptism's role in God's big story. Rich said he was willing to attend but wasn't sure how long he would live. Of course, Rich was baptized right away—he was ready to be claimed by God!

Jesus, your promise is that all who die with you will also live with you. Help us to believe always. Amen.

SUFFERING

I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions.

—Colossians 1:24

During the time when St. Patrick was planting the faith in Ireland, Aengus was king of Munster. When Patrick arrived in Munster to preach, Aengus welcomed him into his royal residence. There Aengus came to faith in Jesus and asked to be baptized. Before a large gathering of his people, the Celts, Patrick baptized the king. During the ceremony, Patrick, without knowing it, drove the iron point of his staff through Aengus's foot. The sharp pole remained there until Aengus's blood trickled onto the floor. All the while the king remained silent, assuming suffering was part of the baptism.

One of the "marks of the true church," said Martin Luther, is suffering. The true church suffers. Baptism helps us see that is how it has always been and will always be. Is it any surprise

then that early churches shaped their baptismal font to look like a tomb?

The verb "to baptize" literally means to be drowned and saturated, or, more freely, to be submerged in the waters of chaos. Christians have always seen a direct link between baptism's imagery and Jesus' call to self-denial. We follow the One who gives himself away. In suffering, we live out our baptism; it shows our union with the dying and rising of Jesus. We receive and remember our baptismal suffering as a means God uses to nurture and sustain our faith.

Lord, we ask for a peaceful life. But when you call us to suffer, help us see it as part of our unity with you in baptism. Amen.

CAN YOU DRINK THE CUP?

“Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”
—Mark 10:38

A friend told me a baptism story from his previous church. The congregation planned to have a baptism service in a local river. The evening before the event, the church deacons put markers in the river, making a clear and safe path to ensure that their pastor and others would not tumble into deep water by accident. But several clever high school students in the congregation also went to the river that night and realigned the markers to their own liking. The next morning, at the designated time in the baptism service, the pastor turned and strode confidently into the river toward the place marked out for baptism. After a few steps, he plunged into deep water, just as the students had hoped. To their delight, the pastor himself was immersed.

Starting with Jesus' earliest disciples, many of his followers

have shown a willingness to go along with Jesus as a way to increase life's comforts. Surely the one who heals the blind offers his followers benefits, doesn't he? Over the centuries a connection to Jesus might get you a better job, a higher class of friends, a free dinner in a bread line, or a good seat.

But Jesus asks “perk-seekers” if they are willing to share in his suffering. Will we live a “baptized life”? Will we die to our ambition and rise to follow? Jesus switches priorities. In the baptismal life, the first are last and the last are first.

Jesus, you invite us deeply into your life. No secrets. No surprises. Only an honest invitation to take up our cross and follow you. Help us obey. Amen.

DELIVER US FROM EVIL

“Deliver us from the evil one.”

—Matthew 6:13

My friend Chris is an Orthodox priest. When people receive baptism in his congregation, they speak words from the most ancient Christian rites. At one point in the liturgy they “renounce Satan and all his ways.” As part of a repeated series of promises, they turn to the world and all its luring charms and spit on it—literally. Then they turn toward God and his church and offer their allegiance.

Sometimes, while people spit, they burst into a giggle. The ancient rite seems silly and old fashioned. But Father Chris, not one to take such rituals lightly, admonishes them, imploring, “Don’t you see how serious this is? This is real. This is a commitment. This is a new direction for your life.”

Yes, it is. For all of us. Whether we are baptized young or old, our baptism sets us in a new

direction. We plead to be led away from temptation. We are wise to pray this petition Jesus taught: “Deliver us from the evil one.”

Life inside and outside the church involves constant temptation, and we often mess up. We tell a white lie. We exaggerate. We gossip. We dodge our sin. We skip a confession. And all the while we try to make ourselves look better than we are.

But our missteps have profound consequences. They certainly did for Ananias and Sapphira! There’s a reason baptism is a symbol of dying and rising.

Father, forgive us for minimizing our sin. Forgive us for justifying ourselves. Keep us honest. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

FALSE COMMITMENT

“Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”
—Acts 8:19

In the movie *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone inherits the godfather role reluctantly. He doesn't want the job at first. But like most people, he finds his father, Vito, the patriarch and crime boss, difficult to resist. So Michael steps in to shepherd the family's business and avenge the loss of his older brother. He will end the bitter war between crime families by eliminating rivals—all of them.

So he gives orders, and while he is in church, standing as godfather for his nephew's baptism, his hit men do their work. On behalf of the child, the priest asks him three times, “Will you renounce the devil and all his works?” And three times Michael responds, his words echoing off the walls of a mostly empty church: “I renounce them. . . . I renounce them. . . . I renounce them.”

Interspersed with these renunciations, the movie shows scenes of Michael's revenge killings as one rival boss after another is gunned down. The unforgettable sequence is called “Baptism of Fire.”

In another setting—a real event—the apostle Peter meets a powerful man who wants God's power but would use it for his own ends. He even tries to buy this power! But Peter sees the devil at work and refuses to accept a false commitment.

Do you renounce the devil and all his works?

Father, we know of so many frauds and schemers. So did your Son. Thank you that his sacrifice has redeemed and renewed such people—even me. In his name, Amen.

BAPTISMAL DIRECTION

We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

—Psalm 100:3

James March, a Stanford professor, theorized that we use two main models for decision making. In the first, we consider consequences and weigh alternatives. We choose the options that yield the most value. In this model, people's actions are rational and self-interested: "Which sofa will provide me the greatest comfort and the best design for the price? Which political candidate will serve my needs and goals?"

In the other model, we choose on the basis of our identity, asking, "Who am I?" and "What do people like me do in this situation?" At the furniture store, for example, our main question becomes "What kind of sofa would a person like me, an upcoming urban hipster, buy?" At the voting booth we ask, "Which candidate would a person like me, a stylish frequent

flyer in middle management, support?"

The Bible has a different way. The covenant-keeping God sweeps us into his family to live as his sons and daughters. They grow to "know that the LORD is God," that is he who made them and they are his. They find that their only true comfort is in belonging—body and soul—to the one true God and Savior.

In a world of a thousand options, those who have been baptized make choices that align with their true identity in Christ. What would one who glorifies God in all things do?

Father, you are the artist who created the world and the rescuer who saved it. Let us live in your love and make choices in tune with your grace. Amen.

CHANGING SCRIPTS

"The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." —Acts 2:39

Everyone lives by a script—even people who try to avoid one. Some scripts are announced and obvious: "I'm going to get married and have 2.3 kids and live in the suburbs." Or "I'm going to make as much money as I possibly can by the time I'm 40." Some scripts are inherited: a woman's parents are medical doctors, so are her grandparents and siblings. Guess what profession she chooses? Other scripts seem determined by birth or circumstances. A child is born in Mumbai, India, to a family that must sort through trash to find food, without any real hope of change. Or a child is born with fetal alcohol syndrome and can't concentrate enough to do math problems or write a paragraph, let alone fill out a job application.

Some of us spend a lifetime determined to make choice after

choice, clawing and dragging our way to a new script. Others spend too much time repeating familiar words: "I will not be like my parents; I will not be like my parents!" And in so doing they live a script influenced mainly by their parents!

In today's verses a large group of Jewish people were following their prescribed liturgical script, celebrating Pentecost. But then the Holy Spirit came. And as Peter preached, thousands asked, "What shall we do?" In effect, he said, "Change your script, and pass it along to your children too."

Father, so much of life seems scripted for us. We often feel trapped. Thank you for inviting us to a new kind of living—life with the Holy Spirit. Amen.

UNDOING BAPTISM?

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.”
—Luke 15:20

In France, an elderly man is fighting to make a formal break with the Catholic Church. He has taken the church to court because it refused his request to nullify his baptism.

He grew up in a church family and says his mother once hoped he'd become a priest. But his views began to change in the 1970s, when he was introduced to free-thinkers. And after he didn't believe in God anymore, he thought it would be more honest to leave the church. So he wrote to his diocese and asked to be unbaptized.

Though marginal, the de-baptism movement is growing, observers say.

In a way, we can be sympathetic. No one wants to be tied to a group they no longer support. Who wants to get letters from

a political party we've ditched, or an insurance company we've left, or a school we were dissatisfied with? Who doesn't delete countless advertising emails pleading for our attention?

Still, baptism into the family of God is different. It gets to the core of who we are, and it comes with an inheritance.

Hearing of this story from France, a friend asked, “What does it say about an unbeliever that he believes enough in the sacrament of baptism to try to undo it?”

Father, thank you for looking for us down our well-worn road of independence, and never giving up on us. For those who have left you—please bring them back to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

OUR TRUE HOME

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

—1 Peter 2:9

A friend of mine, born in South Korea, now lives in California. One day he told me he considers himself a “misfit.” I protested, pointing out his trendy phone, hip jeans, and cultural lingo. “You fit,” I protested. He nodded but said, “All immigrants are ‘misfits.’”

Baptism reminds us that in some ways each believer is a kind of “foreigner” in this world. Our heart and soul are only truly at home in God. Even so, our Lord is always with us!

In a divided world where politics and nationality try to define our identity, baptized people belong first of all to the group Jesus “calls out” to be his church. This new community spans all times and places; it includes “misfits” from every continent and language. In this community people who are typically pushed to the side or kept on

the margin—immigrants, aliens, and people stuck in poverty—find a new expression of their humanity and belonging. Baptism joins slave and free, male and female, American and Canadian, Korean and Japanese, Russian and German, Nigerian and Honduran into one family.

Augustine, a wise Christian who deeply loved his country, said, “Christ is the true country.” In Jesus we really belong.

Are you a citizen of Christ’s kingdom?

Father, your baptism makes us live for Jesus. In the dazzling array of nations, help us to see people of all nationalities as our fellow citizens. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

BAPTISM CLOTHES

All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.
—Galatians 3:27

In an episode of the animated television series *The Simpsons*, Homer Simpson's unkempt children Bart and Lisa suffer from apparent neglect. As a result, they are sent to a foster home, ending up next door, at the house of Ned Flanders. Ned is a bit socially awkward. He's also an honest, well-meaning, evangelical Christian whose spiritual zeal sometimes goes too far. When Ned discovers that neither Bart nor Lisa were baptized, he decides they need an emergency baptism.

Alarmed at hearing this, Homer and Marge rush to the Springfield River to stop Ned. Just as Ned is about to pour holy water on Bart, Homer shoves Bart over to prevent the water from hitting him. In the process the baptismal water douses Homer.

"Wow, Dad, you took a baptism for me," said Bart. "How do

you feel?" Homer, temporarily aglow from his accidental baptism, says something sarcastic about St. Augustine of Hippo and his conversion. Then he returns to his normal rivalry with his neighbor.

As this satirical story shows, there is nothing magical about baptism. That's because baptism is a symbol of God's claim on us and his Spirit's gradual work in us. Still, knowing our baptismal identity affects us. It changes us—though not all at once—because God is faithfully at work in us. And, in his time, we "find ourselves" as God's true sons and daughters.

Father, we are all in process. Please clothe us with your grace. Lead us by your Holy Spirit, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ONE BAPTISM

There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all. —Ephesians 4:4-6

The Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Gilead* tells the story of John Ames, a Congregational minister. Writing a series of reflections to pass along to his young son, he says, “When I was in seminary, I used to go sometimes to watch the Baptists down at the river. It was something to see the preacher lifting the one who was being baptized up out of the water and the water pouring off the garments and the hair. It did look like a birth or a resurrection. For us the water just heightens the touch of the pastor’s hand on the sweet bones of the head, sort of like making an electrical connection. I’ve always loved to baptize people, though I have sometimes wished there were more shimmer and splash involved in the way we go about it.”

Ames goes on to say that he didn’t become a minister for the

usual reasons. He chose the profession because it gave him the opportunity to confer blessing.

In real life, baptism always involves a kind of blessing. So does living it. And Christians of every kind and type and denomination share this blessing together. There aren’t really Baptist and Lutheran and Presbyterian and Catholic and Orthodox baptisms. There is only one. We are united together in Christ.

Have you come to know the blessings of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”?

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, wrap up all our differences in your eternal dance of oneness, and teach us to delight in you. In Jesus, Amen.

HUMILITY

“Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan . . . and you will be cleansed.”
—2 Kings 5:10

He was the top commander in a powerful army. He knew all the right people. His king regarded him as “a great man.” He had influence and money. He had servants at his beck and call. He had an entourage that followed him everywhere. And he was a *leper*.

Leprosy changed everything for Naaman. And this leprosy set the stage for an intriguing drama, a story that tells us something of what baptism is about.

Most of us, in our honest moments, would choose power over weakness, influence over being ignored, and prestige over neglect. We like to be the one making decisions and getting perks, not the one who depends on another’s mercy.

Naaman found that no one could help him. And in this one area of his life, he couldn’t help himself. He was at the end of his rope.

So he went to see the prophet of God in Israel. The prophet’s instructions, though, seemed like a joke, an insult. Wash in the Jordan?! Naaman would gladly have done some great deed—anything!—to earn the favor of the God of Israel.

But the God of Israel doesn’t work that way. He wakes us out of our self-sufficiency.

Elisha didn’t even greet the entourage. He sent a messenger to say, in effect, “Go, humble yourself. And be cleansed.”

Are we willing to be humbled?

Lord, we often think we are self-sufficient. But you invite us into your baptismal waters that make us clean. Thank you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

ADOPTED

[You have] been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God.

—Colossians 2:12

Dhini was a three-year-old with milk-chocolate skin, jet-black hair, and brown eyes like saucers. Her new dad and mom brought her from India to their North American home.

Pastor Craig Barnes remembers her arrival: She spoke only a few words of English. A large mole on her shoulder had to be removed before it would become cancerous. A series of complicated surgeries and skin grafts would take years to complete. Further, she had spent most of her life in an orphanage, often left alone. So her motor skills were underdeveloped.

But now she also had two parents madly in love with her, and a church family that had prayed for her a year before they knew her name. Most of all, she had the amazing devotion of God.

Barnes got through most of the baptismal liturgy. But when he came to the part about her being adopted into God's family and looked up to see Dhini in her father's arms, and her arms around her daddy, Barnes started crying. No one offered to take over, so the whole congregation worshiped in a teary silent prayer. Eventually, Dhini's new father poured the water of the covenant over his daughter's head. The entire congregation was a happy, tearful mess.

We all have issues. But none are so big that God's holy love can't cover them.

Father, thank you for adopting us as your children, through the work of your Son, our Brother, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

MARKED

He received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith.
—Romans 4:11

We all bear marks that identify us in one way or another. We have scars, or birthmarks, or wrinkles, or wedding bands. We have tattoos, or bald spots, or a limp, or a favorite shirt. Those who believe in Jesus are marked with baptism, showing we belong to God.

For the Roman army it was customary to mark recruits as a sign of their enlistment. Their mark was called a *signaculum*, often made by tattooing the hand or the forearm with an abbreviation of the name of their general. Another word, *sphragis*, signified a mark that an owner stamped on her possessions. It also described the sign that shepherds used to brand their sheep to distinguish them from the sheep of others. In Romans 4:11, the Greek word *sphragis* describes Abraham's circumcision.

In the first centuries after Christ, church leaders used these terms to give emphasis to baptism. When someone was baptized, pastors made a sign of the cross on the person's forehead. It was a way to say, "You now belong to Christ. You are now branded as part of the flock of Christ or the army of Christ."

The mark was a seal of protection as well as ownership. John Chrysostom said, "As the *sphragis* is imprinted on soldiers, so is the Holy Spirit on those who believe. Baptism is an enlistment in the service of Christ." How have you shown your branding in Christ?

Father, let our baptism symbolize to us your holy, permanent seal that we are in your care. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

SENT TO GATHER ALL THE NATIONS

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

—Matthew 28:19

Grace Thomas was a gentle Christian woman raised in the southern United States. Thomas Long tells her story in his book *Preaching from Memory and Hope*. Born to a streetcar conductor in Alabama, she grew up, married, and found work in a government office in Atlanta. She also went to school and earned a law degree, and in 1954 Grace surprised her family by running for governor of Georgia to support the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that “separate but equal” schools were unconstitutional.

She lost in 1954 but ran again in 1962. At a campaign stop in Louisville, Georgia, Grace gave a speech in an old slave market, saying, “This place represents all about our past over which we must repent. A new day is here when Georgians white and black can join hands and

work together.” Someone there accused her of promoting communist ideas, but Grace pointed to a church steeple nearby and said, “I got [these ideas] . . . in Sunday school.”

Grace understood that making disciples and baptizing all nations will result in a worldwide body of believers including all ethnicities, languages, and cultures. In the kingdom of God, all nations walk by the light of God (Revelation 21:24-26). There is only one identity for those who are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. May it be ever so!

Father, you give your renewing life to all who follow Jesus. Help us, in his name, to live as those who are sent. Amen.

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FINANCES MOVIES SPORTS
PROTESTS WORSHIP KIDS
ADDICTION WAR BUSINESS
BOOKS GAY MARRIAGE TV
STEM CELLS PORNOGRAPHY
JUSTICE HOLIDAYS SERVICE
LEADERSHIP FAMILIES RACE
EVANGELISM IMMIGRATION
NO SUCH THING AS SECULAR

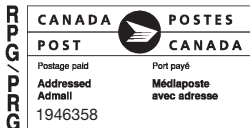
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