

The Story of Baptism

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Genesis 17:1-13

We witnessed a Baptism tonight. James Gerald Doezema was baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And there are many ways we explain, or try to explain, what that means for him. We talk about his sins being washed away. We talk about him dying and rising with Christ. All of these are our attempts to understand God's mysterious purpose in this sacrament. Tonight I'd like to add another way of thinking about what happened to James when we baptized him. It's also a way of understanding what happened to all of us when we were baptized. We can say that today, when James was baptized, he became a character in a story. When a child is baptized, that child's life gets a plotline. When a child is baptized his life gets a trajectory. From now on James' life is caught up in the great story of God, his kingdom, his people.

That means his story is different from the story of the people around him. Because, it's not just baptized people whose lives have stories: all people put their lives on a trajectory. All people plot a story for their lives. So, for example, if you grow up in mainstream, middle class America, the culture around you will give a default story to your life. If you just sort of go with the current of culture, your life will get a default plotline: Your life will follow the Happy Family storyline. Let me give you brief description of the plotline for this Happy Family story. You grow up in a nice safe home with a Mom and Dad who love you. You have a brother a sister, a dog, and a play structure in your backyard. You go to a nice school in the neighborhood, make friends, you play t-ball on Saturday mornings, play hide and seek on summer nights and spend holidays at grandma's house. As you get older, you bop through Jr. high school, high school, and move on to college where you meet a really nice girl. You date for a couple of years, and after graduation you get married in a nice church like this one. Your Mom and Dad wipe away tears as they watch from the front row. You and your spouse get jobs and you buy your first home together. You spend your weekends fixing the home up just the way you want, lots of trips to Lowes for paint and lumber for the new deck and tile for the bathroom. Soon your decorating needs include a nursery! A baby is on the way! Everyone is excited and when the baby arrives there is tremendous joy. Your friends start to have kids too and you all get together on Saturday evenings at each other's places, you sit out on the back deck in the summertime and you watch children toddle around. Then, all of a sudden, your life is immersed in school and piano lessons and soccer games; life whips by at an exhilarating pace, Next thing you know, it's you walking your child down the aisle and you welcoming the grandkids, and before you know it retirement is upon you. A Big Picture from the last reunion hangs above the fireplace- kids and grandkids all together. You keep busy: you spend time taking care of grandkids, you go on the occasional vacation, you pursue some hobbies, you spend lots of weeks visiting the grandkids until finally your body and your will wear down. You put your name in at the retirement complex, you stay as active as you can moving from condo, to smaller room, to supportive care until you slip away, pain free, your children at your side, into the arms of the hereafter. That is the Happy Family story. It is the default story of American life. If you just let the culture sweep you along, that will be the life-trajectory you'll aim for. Even if you don't reach it, you will aim for it.

We learn the Happy Family story in all sorts of ways. Retirement and investment company commercials often feature some version of this cradle-to-grave happy family story. This is basically the mythology that undergirds the entire HGTV network. There are a lot of movies that teach this story. There is a fairly typical plot line for action movies: bad guys threaten Happy Family. Man fights bad guys to save family. There are tons of movies based on this mythology. In the nineties there was Patriot Games. Harrison Ford played Jack Ryan, a former CIA agent forced to defend his young family against terrorists. The movie begins with Jack and his lovely wife and his two lovely children on vacation, just trying to enjoy themselves and live the American story. But terrorists break into things and threaten to destroy the sanctity of his family. Jack fights! And the movie ends with the terrorists actually coming to Jack's cozy white home to hurt his family, but Jack fights them off one by one, finishing the last one off in hand to hand combat – mano a mano. You can see the mythology of that film. It's not just a spy thriller; it's a celebration of the happy family story. All the Taken movies with Liam Neeson – same mythology. The John Wick movies. This is absolutely the mythology, the story behind Gladiator, the Russel Crowe movie that won best picture back in 2000.

Now, this Happy Family is not a terrible evil. There's a lot of good in it. Nothing wrong with happy families! Young couples decorating their home. Family reunions with cousins and in-laws all milling about. Big family pictures over the fireplace. These are all good things. The problem with the Happy Family story is not that it's evil; it's just insufficient. It's too shallow. It's too thin. And more importantly, it's not Jesus' story. It's not the deep, rich, eternal story that Jesus calls us to in this book.

Tonight in this place, when we baptized James, we baptized him into Jesus' story. The story of Baptism is a deeper story. In our baptism life gets a different trajectory and it's a trajectory you see in Genesis 17. It might not seem like that at first. When you first read Genesis 17, it might seem like God is promising Abraham some version of the happy family story. Abraham! Your family will be big. I will give you land to live in which will be yours forever and I will make your family prosperous – kings will come from you!!” It sounds like God is promising Abraham his white picket fence and his 2 and a half kids. But that's not the case. This covenant that God is talking about is way deeper and more complicated than that.

Let's review the story of our Baptism: The story of baptism starts in Genesis 3. You remember the scene. Adam and Eve are standing there shamefaced. They are both pointing at each other and making accusations. And God is looking over the wreckage of the beautiful world he made. A good world has been mangled by human sin. Things were so bad that you wonder if the world is even worth saving. Maybe just God will just bulldoze the whole thing and start over. But God does not bulldoze; instead, he starts a grand renovation project. And he starts that renovation project by calling one man and making his family the renovation crew. That man is Abraham. In Genesis 12:1-3 God says - paraphrasing, “Abraham, I'm going to use you and your family to begin fixing this world. I'm going to use you and your family as the chief contractors in this restoration project. Leave your family home and go to a land that I'll show you. I'll set you up there and get you started and you and all your family and all your descendants will be my people, dedicated to the restoration work. All the nations of the world will be blessed through your work.” That renovation plan, that covenant, is being reaffirmed here in Genesis 17. The Lord reminds Abraham that he still plans to make him a great big family. God even introduces a sign for all Abraham's male children to remind them of this special role they have. It's circumcision. All male children will be circumcised as a way of reminding them that they are part of God's people and are set apart for this special restoration work. By their work and their witness, the world will return to its true Lord. If you keep reading after Genesis 17, if you work your way through the whole Old Testament, Abraham's descendants become the

nation of Israel, and, as we all know, Israel doesn't always live up to their call to be God's renovation crew. Sometimes they are faithful and they manage to build a community of people who love God and each other. But other times they seem to make things worse.

But then God makes a surprising move, a move that had always been part of the plan. He sends his Son, Jesus, to join the renovation work. And not just to join the renovation work, but to take charge of it, to move it forward. Jesus becomes the new foreman of the job. He is completely committed to this renovation work, and even though the workers he has around him are half-hearted at best, Jesus is so committed he gives his life for the sake of the world and its people. His death and resurrection becomes the firm foundation for a new creation. Jesus pulls together all the broken pieces of the world - in him all things hold together. All of a sudden the renovation project takes on a whole new scope. Pentecost happens and now the renovation team isn't just confined to the people of Israel. Now people all over the world, including people like us, are baptized into Christ. We become children of Abraham! We are all part of the renovation team. Instead of circumcision, the sign of that membership is now Baptism! Now there are little groups, little congregations of these renovation people all over the world. These renovation families get together every week to praise God and remind each other of the grace they've received and the call they've been given. And then every week they go out to do that renovating work. All the while waiting for that great day when Christ the foreman will return and bring the renovation project to its glorious conclusion - a new creation.

That's the baptism story. That's our story. When you are Baptized, every day of your life gets shaped by this story and follows its trajectory. Every day you get up in the morning and you say, "Lord, thank you for your grace that renovated me. Now, how can I, by your Spirit, make the world a little better today? Lord use me to renovate your world. When you are baptized and part of this renovation team you find that living for yourself and your family and its security just isn't enough! The Spirit pushes you out to bigger things. There's something in you that wants to help, that wants to bless, that wants to fix what's broken, that wants to change the world.

Now, I know this maybe sounds a little grandiose. When you are baptized your goal is to change the world? Peter! Please! Renovate the world? I'm lucky if I can find matching socks in the morning! Believe me I get that. But saying that you're baptized and now your life story is to change the world with Jesus doesn't necessarily mean anything grand sweeping. It might mean that. Maybe when we baptized James this morning that means that God has something really big in store for him. Sometimes that happens. Maybe James will grow up to be a great Christian leader in the order of Martin Luther King Jr or Mother Theresa or Billy Graham. It could happen! Sometimes Baptism does lead to grand things. But most of the time changing the world means something much simpler. Like the 75 year old congregation member who goes every Monday to the local nursing home to read to nursing patients for an hour and a half. And then on Wednesday night always sits down with a stack of cards and sends them to a few people in the congregation who really need them, and on Fridays always goes over to the local public school to tutor second graders who need a little extra help. Why does she do all these things? Why does she keep pouring herself out in little ways every day when she doesn't have a ton of energy to give in the first place? Because of her baptism. Because the Spirit got into her and now she lives by this story. She gratefully follows her Lord and Savior and she tries to do something every week that continues His renovation work.

It's a full life that starts at this font. Full of work and challenge and service, but full of excitement, adventure, wonder; full of joy, and most importantly full of God. So God bless all of you renovation workers. May you have another blessed week, working in His world.

