

# Step Into The Water

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Searcy, Arkansas  
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## Scripture Reading

*“The Lord said to Joshua, “What I do today will make all the people of Israel begin to honor you as a great man, and they will realize that I am with you as I was with Moses. Tell the priests carrying the Covenant Box that when they reach the river, they must wade in and stand near the bank.” Then Joshua said to the people, “Come here and listen to what the Lord your God has to say. As you advance, he will surely drive out the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. You will know that the living God is among you when the Covenant Box of the Lord of all the earth crosses the Jordan ahead of you. Now choose twelve men, one from each of the tribes of Israel. <sup>13</sup> When the priests who carry the Covenant Box of the Lord of all the earth put their feet in the water, the Jordan will stop flowing, and the water coming downstream will pile up in one place.” It was harvest time, and the river was in flood. When the people left the camp to cross the Jordan, the priests went ahead of them, carrying the Covenant Box. As soon as the priests stepped into the river, the water stopped flowing and piled up, far upstream at Adam, the city beside Zarethan. The flow downstream to the Dead Sea was completely cut off, and the people were able to cross over near Jericho. While the people walked across on dry ground, the priests carrying the Lord's Covenant Box stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan until all the people had crossed over” (Joshua 3:7-17 GNT)*

*“That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land! That’s what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we’re going in our new grace-sovereign country. Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer captive to sin’s demands! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ’s sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection.” (Romans 6:3-5 MSG)*

*“Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up*

*out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:35-39 ESV).*

### **CASSEROLES & BAPTISTRIES**

A kindergarten teacher told her class, “To get to know each other better, tomorrow, I want you to bring a symbol of your religion to class.”

On the following day, the students came to class each went in turn sharing what they brought.

“I’m Jewish,” said the first child, “and this is a Menorah.”

“I’m a Catholic,” said the second child, “and this is a crucifix.”

The third child went to the front and said, “I’m from the church of Christ, and this is a casserole.”<sup>1</sup>

Having been here for 1 month, and having already enjoyed 3 Care group fellowship meals, a watermelon gathering, and an ice-cream social, I think that was a very astute observation! But I also suspect the reason that kid brought a casserole is because he couldn’t lug a baptistry into school.

If there is anything we are known for, I’d say somewhere in the top 3 most noticeable things about us is that we practice adult immersion when people come forward and want to say yes to Jesus. And I am glad to be known for that.

### **A DIVIDING LINE**

From the very beginning, water symbolized a diving line. In Genesis 1, God separated the waters that were above the sky from the waters that were below the sky. That is, water stood between heaven and earth. Just six chapters later, when all the world has turned their backs on God, Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. And he and his family rest safely in the ark as water separates those who are alive and those who are

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from

[https://www.reddit.com/r/Christianity/comments/2vtjq9/a\\_teacher\\_tells\\_her\\_students\\_to\\_bring\\_a\\_symbol\\_of/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Christianity/comments/2vtjq9/a_teacher_tells_her_students_to_bring_a_symbol_of/).

Many thanks to Rick Atchley for using this illustration in a sermon 35 years ago to introduce the subject of baptism.

not. When the children of Abraham were stuck in Egyptian slavery, God heard their cries, and brought them out of slavery, out of the house of bondage. They come all the way to the edge when they are stopped by the Red Sea. This sea stood between slavery and freedom; between the control of Pharaoh and the leading of God. By God’s power, they cross the Red Sea, and then the waves came crashing down upon Pharaoh and his army. That is, the water that protected God’s chosen ones, destroyed all that defined their past, and freed them to journey on. They did journey in the wilderness, until it came time to enter the promised land. But water separated them. The Jordan River was a rushing one. It didn’t seem like it could be crossed. But at God’s command, they stepped into the water and it became still. It was only after they passed through the water, it was after the “crossing over”, that they set up stones to commemorate and remember this is when and this is where they passed through the water and entered the promised land.

Surely this backdrop helps explain why the symbols in both the tabernacle and temple reproduced the dividing line of water. If you wanted to leave the camp and enter the holy place, you had to wash your whole body in the laver—you took a bath of full immersion, and then and only then were you prepared—washed and sanctified—made ready to enter the holy place to commune with God.

This may also help explain why, when John the Baptist began to preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, way out in the desert, there were lots of questions—about his authority mostly—but no question about what “baptism” is. Water as a dividing line was common knowledge, and second nature.

That’s true for anyone with a Jewish background. But what about if you were Greek or Roman? For them, the dividing line wasn’t water...it was blood. If you were to join one of the very famous Greco-Roman cults in the first century, like the Cult of Mithras, you were supposed to lay down in a large empty bathtub. They would put a grate over the top of you, then they would cut the head off of a large bull. And the blood of the bull would pour out through the grate and cover you. They called it a regeneration ritual. The blood of the bull was “meant to cleanse the moral faults of the initiate and to renew both his soul and his physical strength. The descent into the pit was seen as a sort of symbolic burial from which the initiate emerged reborn and purified. [And it was] the blood itself [that] was considered the purifying force.”<sup>2</sup>

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<https://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Projects/Reln91/Gender/mythras.htm#:~:text=Blood%2C%20Gender%2C%20and%20Power%20in%20Judaism%20and%20Christianity&text=The%20Cult%20of%20Mithras%20was,contract%22%20or%20%22agreement%22.>

Water and blood. Two powerful markers. Dividing lines. Connected to cleansing and healing. Associated with regeneration and rejuvenation. Two appointments moments marking the time and place you left the old and entered the new.

And what do we find in the New Testament? Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ came to the waters of the Jordan River to recreate the crossing over experience. John didn't want to do it of course. This was the lamb of God. But Jesus urged him “we must do this. We must fulfill all righteousness.” Israel has been called to cross over. All people all over the world are called to cross over. And Jesus who is the Messiah, Jesus who is the embodiment of Israel's call and mission, Jesus who is our moral example, Jesus crosses over by passing through the water. And the sky—the sky that separated heaven and earth—burst open—removing forever the dividing line between God and humanity. Jesus' disciples continued to baptized others. After his death and resurrection, just before he ascended to the right hand of the throne of God, Jesus gave this mission to his disciples: to go into all the world preaching the good news of salvation, making disciples (learners, followers of Jesus). And to baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. It is the mission of the church to make disciples and to play a role in the crossing over experience of every disciple.

In story after story after story in the book of Acts, the Spirit of God leads the people of God to share the good news of salvation; and in story after story after story, people respond with faith, repentance, and baptism. They cross over. Water is an easy sell for the Jewish background. But baptism is a unifying experience—just as all of Israel passed through the water, so all who claim King Jesus pass through the waters of baptism. So how to reach the Gentiles who would claim allegiance to the Lord? You know how. Paul does it brilliantly. Remember that cult of Mithras? Remember how blood—blood is the dividing line? That's in Judaism too with the sacrifice of the lamb. We know that the blood of bulls and goats was never meant to take away sin. What can wash away my sin? Nothing...nothing but the blood of Jesus. So Paul reminds his readers—in Rome, no less—that when we were baptized, we were baptized into his death. We were buried with him in baptism—a phrase that could easily have been borrowed from the lips of any Roman at any Roman blood ritual, with one major exception—it's the blood of Jesus. We participate in his death and in his burial. We enter the pit and have his blood poured over us. Jew and Gentile. Male and Female. Slave and free. And if we are united with him in the likeness of his death, writes Paul, rest assured, you have this hope: we shall also be with him in the likeness of his resurrection.

And Paul's language to the Romans doesn't just resonate with Gentiles. He speaks to the Jewish roots as well. As Tom Wright has pointed out, In Romans 1-8, Paul rewrites

the Exodus story, with God calling a people out of darkness by his grace, leading them through the water, then empowering them with His Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

When Judaism would speak of separating water in the laver, Christianity speaks of the crossing over at baptism. When Gentiles would speak of the ritual burial in blood, Christianity speaks of our burial in baptism. When the religious leaders would emphasize the distinguishing mark of circumcision that portrays and announces to the world your Jewish identity, Christianity emphasizes the distinguishing moment of baptism that announces our identity in Christ—for as many of us as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Gal 3:27). And it is for everyone. Circumcision and the cult of Mithras were male-only; but baptism is for all. The Laver and holy of holies were for Jews only (and often male only; or priest only). But baptism is for all. And all who enter the water, all who cross over, are called priests, all are made part of God’s holy nation. All are separated from the world of sin that held them in slavery. All are made free. There is now neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. For we are all one in Christ Jesus.

### ***WHY BE BAPTIZED?***

Baptism was God’s brilliant idea. The two key rituals for Christian experience are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Think about it: bread and water. The two things that can be found anywhere there is life. Without them, you die. Two things that are reproducible in any culture. And both represent body and blood. The essence of who we are and what we bring. The essence of what happened for us on the cross.

Why do we practice baptism here? Why should you be baptized? There a number of good, biblical reasons.

Baptism imitates the example of our Lord. I am with him in his death, and in his resurrection. I know this, because I was with him in his baptism. Jesus was baptized, and he told his followers to baptize.

Baptism symbolizes our answer to the greatest commandment. We announce our total, life-long commitment as we give our whole selves—everything we are (heart, mind, body, and strength) to Jesus Christ and God the Father, as we are plunged beneath the waters. None of self, and all of Thee, O Lord.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://outoftheoverflow.com/2013/02/21/n-t-wright-on-baptism/>

Baptism demonstrates the gospel, as all the central truths of the Christian faith are told and retold in every baptism. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, and we are baptized confessing his name. We believe there is one God—Father, Son, and Spirit—and we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. We believe in one faith—the death, burial and resurrection of Christ—and we display that faith visibly as we die to ourselves, are buried in baptism, and arise to walk a new life. We believe in one church, the community of faith, and we know that in baptism, a person is added to the one body that exists all over the world and in the heavens—past, present, and future. We believe that in our one baptism we cry out for forgiveness, knowing we are weak and sinful and in need of a savior. And the Bible promises that one of the gifts we receive in baptism is forgiveness of our sins. We believe in one Spirit, and another gift that comes to us is the gift of that one Spirit to indwell us, empower us, seal us, sanctifying us, and lead us as we journey on the other side of the river. And We believe in one hope—the hope of resurrection, visibly dramatized as we come up out of the water; one hope of new creation, when God will make all things right. And we believe every person who comes up out of the water is a new creation; behold, all things become new! In other words, “Baptism will not let you forget the gospel. Every time a person is baptized, the gospel is preached all over again.”<sup>4</sup>

Baptism is a uniting event. Jesus’ prayer in the garden was that all of his people would present unity to the world. Baptism is no respecter of persons. Jew and Gentile. Male and Female. Slave and Free. Believers differ on so many things. We are unlike in so many ways. But we can all remember our baptism and know that God has placed us in the same family. We have this shared experience, just as we are called to share all that we have and all that we are. The New Testament does not know of an unbaptized Christian.

Baptism is God’s appointed time and place to mark our crossing over and to remind us that we are not who we used to be but are called to be different. Theologian Stanley Grenz writes, “we...recall the day of our baptism and thereby are reminded both of the commitment we made to Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit sealed to us on that day.”<sup>5</sup> God does not force his grace on anyone. So he could have appointed any time and any place. But because it is a uniting event, because it is rich with symbolism, because it can be done anywhere by anyone, because it dramatizes the death and resurrection of Jesus, because it connects us with our Old Testament ancestry and looks forward to the new creation at the end of all things, God has appointed this time and this place (as the Hebrew writer puts it) for us to come near to the throne of grace,

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<sup>4</sup> Rick Atchley, “What’s the Big Deal About Baptism?”

<sup>5</sup> Grenz, *Theology for the community of God*, p.523-524.

having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience as our bodies are washed with pure water.

As Tom Wright notes, talk to any missionary on the front lines of a Muslim country and they will tell you. When someone gets baptized, everybody knows that something significant is happening. You are dying to one whole way of life, leaving that community and everything associated with it, and joining another community and its new way of life. Wright concludes, “It’s interesting that sometimes people of other faiths recognize the huge importance of baptism better than we Christians recognize it ourselves.”<sup>6</sup>

### ***BUT THE STORY IS JESUS***

Baptism is important, isn’t it? It’s not just important...its necessary. It’s commanded by our Lord, ubiquitous in the New Testament, and has been affirmed and reaffirmed by leaders throughout Church history. If you have never been baptized, I urge you to be baptized today.

But I confess to you I have rarely preached a sermon on this subject. I’d like to explain why. Because, you see, I want to be a New Testament gospel preacher. And I don’t see this as the title of a sermon very often in the New Testament.

In fact, outside of the peculiar story in Acts 19 of the fellas who only knew about the baptism of John, nobody in the NT was baptized in response to a sermon on baptism! Instead, they were baptized in response to a sermon on Jesus. That’s not a small detail. It’s not something to leave on the side, look at and say “that’s interesting,” then walk away from. That’s significant.

In Acts 8, the Queen’s treasurer had a question about the prophecy of Isaiah. Who is Isaiah talking about? That’s the question. And the text says that Philip—ever the missional evangelist—chose to meet the man where he was and began at that same scripture to preach to him...Jesus. Baptism clearly is connected to preaching Jesus. But the sermon topic was Jesus. And in response to Jesus, the treasurer asked to be baptized.

As it turns out, Jesus is the subject in every major passage we use to emphasize baptism. The crowd in Acts 2 heard a sermon...about Jesus. Jesus—the same one they had gathered around just 50 days prior and nailed to a tree. Jesus, who was unjustly treated as a common criminal—the same one has been raised from the dead, ascended to the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://outoftheoverflow.com/2013/02/21/n-t-wright-on-baptism/>

highest heavens, sat down at the right hand of the throne of God, and has been made both Lord and Christ. Jesus. That was the subject. Cut to the heart—aware of their own sinfulness and fearful that they had put to death the Son of God, cried out “what shall we do?” Another way of saying that, “How will we ever escape if we killed the resurrected guy who is Lord of the universe??” And Peter tells them to do some things. Repent? Yes. Be Baptized? Yes. But the really significant thing is still to come. You see, John the Baptist had already told them to repent and be baptized. Not only that, he had told them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Look at Mark 1:4 or Luke 3:3. It’s right there in black and white. That wasn’t a new thing, and it wasn’t really news. The news is tucked in the middle of those phrases, between “be baptized” and “for the forgiveness of sins.” You see, once you had to seek absolution through the Temple. But now, you can seek *it in the name of Jesus Christ*. We see it in Acts 16, when the jailer sees all the empty cells, and knows his own life will probably be cut short for dereliction of duty. “Sirs, what must I do to be saved” could easily be translated, “how can I get out of this mess that will surely end my career and probably my life?” And the answer is Jesus. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved, you and your whole house.” Jesus. Jesus. Jesus is the question, and Jesus is the answer. He believed on the Lord. So, naturally, baptism followed.

We see it in Paul’s own conversion story. Three days he sat there in the blinding darkness. Three days Paul lived with himself, reflecting on just how far his own thinking had gone wrong. Reflecting on the fact that they stoned a disciple of Christ, he held the coats! When the Lord Jesus called up servants to share his message, he went out seeking letters for permission to round them up and send them to jail. But Jesus—the same Jesus—had mercy on him. Met him on the road to Damascus. Called him by name and called him to mission. So Ananias, sent by God, said “Brother Saul, why are you waiting? “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins.” If we stop there, thinking we found the key that we need to tell our neighbors—the key that makes us different, and that if used to unlock the doors of the kingdom, can make them Christians too—we miss the point of the whole passage. “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins.” But nothing can wash away my sins, nothing but the blood of Jesus. Not the blood of bulls and goats; not my own righteous deeds. Not my best efforts. Not my hardest trials. Nothing. Nothing but the blood of Jesus. And that’s why Ananias said, “Why are you waiting? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, *calling on the name of the Lord*.” How he called upon the name of the Lord is important; but the fact that the answer to the question of salvation is not the procedure; it’s the person. You need saving? Then you need Jesus.

Romans 6 has the same story. Galatians 3 has the same story. Baptism is mentioned several times, but never as the central aspect, or the centerpiece of the conversation. It’s Jesus Christ. How can we who are dead to sin, live any longer in it? Don’t you know,



we were buried with *Him* in baptism like unto death. And if we have been planted together with *him* in the likeness of his death, we shall also be in the likeness of *his* resurrection. We are all sons of *God* by faith in *Christ Jesus*. For as many of us as were baptized into *Christ* have put on *Christ*.

Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. He is the subject and the main focus of these passages. But if baptism is part of the plan of God—if it is included in the prescribed response—if the practice is in the New Testament and is laid out for us, and is expected of us, then what’s the difference in how we think of it? Hear me now: *all the difference in the world*.

I once read of a preacher who had spent all of his life sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with a lost and dying world. He gave his time, his money, his energy; he chose to forgo a worldly occupation that would have earned him 10 times what he made in ministry, but believed it was his mission his calling and his thrill to share the life-giving story of Jesus as his primary vocation. And there, on his deathbed, confessed to his son that he was worried about the judgment. Nervous about the throne room. Just not sure he had done enough. His son, also a preacher, looked at his father with tears pouring down his eyes; he said, “you’re right, Daddy; you haven’t done enough. But Jesus did enough. And that’s why you are going to be with him tonight.”

The gospel is not that God provided a system by which I am able to save myself. The gospel is about Jesus Christ. The one who saw you in your sinfulness. He saw you. He loved you. He chose you. And He came for you. He lived for you. He died for you. He was raised for you. He now empowers you. He has prepared a place for you. And He will one day return for you. The gospel. It’s a story that can only be told in parable. It’s like a woman who has one expensive coin. It’s all she talks about. It’s what she’s known for. And then she loses it. So she turns over every cushion. She sweeps out the cellar. She pulls up the original hardwood floors. She turns that place over inside and out. She digs up old Yeller just to see if maybe he took it down with him. And after all of her searching...she finds it! That feeling—if you could put it in a bottle—that feeling that will lead to the greatest celebration in her entire town; that feeling, that sense of relief and peace, that thrill, that sense of overwhelming joy—that, my friends, that is what the kingdom of God is like. That is what the gospel is all about. And it’s yours...because of Jesus Christ. That is why Paul said to the Corinthians he was so glad he only baptized a handful of them. Because he didn’t come to baptize, but to preach the gospel! It’s why he determined to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

And when you get that story...when you come face to face with that unimaginable truth—that the greatest wickedness ever perpetrated in the history of the world was done at my hands, but I am absolved by the very one I put on the cross because he can’t help but love me, want me, and claim me for his very own...it breaks open my

world! And there is nothing...nothing...nothing I wouldn't do for him. No where I wouldn't go to find him. And to those....to those...the word is given: “He'll meet you at the water.”

I have never known an atheist to have much trouble with the concept of baptism. You may recall Naaman who was willing to go anywhere, and do anything, to be cured of his leprosy. And the prophet tells him to dip in the water 7 times. It seems ridiculous. “I'll travel the world and try every experimental treatment; don't make light of my predicament with your silly games.” And the servant has to say to his master, “you would really climb Mt. Everest to pick a flower that goes in a potion if it would mean healing for you, wouldn't you? If you would go to the end of the earth to do some great thing, why is dipping in the water such a problem?” We know why...don't we. We know why. Because when it seems so simple and silly, it hardly feels like we did anything at all. And isn't that the point. Critics of baptism will say “that's a work, and we aren't saved by works.” But baptism is never called a “work” in the New Testament. Ironically, “belief” IS called a work in the New Testament—“the work of God.” But isn't that what baptism is? Is there anything more passive? God's appointed place where he meets us as we accept his free gift is, by design, a moment when the greatest thing we do is simply fall down. Is there any better image of receiving something I didn't earn and didn't deserve? Is there any better way to announce to everyone watching that the secret, the power, the question and the answer is Jesus Christ, and not myself? You bend your knees and fall. Baptism is far less what you do and far more what is done to you. Pictures the gospel, doesn't it!

What can we say about the groom who looks deep into his lovers eyes at the moment when he is supposed to give his personally written vows. And he says to her “I drove a long way to be here, and I spent a lot of money on this suit, so you owe me a marriage”? The ceremony is important. I, for one, continue to believe that before the preacher says “man and wife,” they aren't man and wife. But after the preacher says “man and wife,” they really are man and wife. The ceremony is important. It's defining. But its still simply the appointed place and time. It's the crucial and important ceremony. But It's not the marriage. And we aren't clapping and crying and singing and cheering because we think it's a grand ceremony. We are throwing the party to celebrate a lifetime commit of “I Do's” and the personification of love as one says to the other “come what may...I do. For you, I do. I will always do. Rest assured, I will never NOT do.” That's what we are celebrating.

When we witness a baptism, and all the young people hoop and holler and clap for joy (because that's how young people show their appreciation); and when all the older people say a hearty and reverend “Amen” (because that's how they, in time honored tradition, have grown to show their respect for the profound thing they just witnessed),

none of that is because of how well you fell backward in the preachers arms. Or how well you can hold your breath. No. We witness you saying “yes” to Jesus Christ, the Jesus who said “yes” to you 2,000 years ago...and has been calling your name in the pages of Scripture ever since.

Baptism is not the good news. It’s our response to the good news. It’s not the gospel. It is our response to the gospel. What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Jesus saves you. Jesus saves you. As Everett Ferguson once put it, the blood of Christ applied by grace is how we are saved; baptism is simply the *time and place* he has chosen. And in this event, at this time, and in this place, we announce to the world we wish to cross over. We want the free gift. We simply say yes to Jesus.

The Queen’s Treasurer heard the story of Jesus...it made him want to be baptized. And he went on his way rejoicing. Rejoicing.

My friend and classmate Doka converted to Christianity from his Muslim upbringing. I met him at Freed Hardeman, where he was the happiest man I had ever met. One day in communication class, he decided to tell his story. And every mouth hit the floor. On the day he was baptized, his father in law put a bounty on his head. He had to flee from his home country, leaving his wife and children behind. He came to America, and went to Bible college to prepare himself to share the gospel? Why? Because he couldn’t wait to share it with his father-in-law, who wanted him dead! That was 25 years ago. I always wondered how that story ended. If you want to know, visit Highway sometime. Doka’s son worships there. He’s a student at Harding. And the gospel continues to do its work.

Baptism is necessary; required; essential. It is obedient faith. It is imitating Christ. It is retelling the gospel. It is obeying the greatest commandment. It is our crossing over, exodus moment. And the religious leaders rejected the council of God by not being baptized. They wanted to stay in the shadows. They didn’t want to go public. That’s why, as Max Lucado says in one of his books, baptism separates the car buyer from the tire-kicker. It’s time to commit. It’s time to unite with Christ. It’s time to accept the cross as your way of life.

And if you will permit me, I’d love to do the honors. The four most powerful words a minister can impart are “I now pronounce you.” I get to do it in weddings. And I get to do it in baptisms. Make the good confession. Let His story become your story. Obey his call. Unite will all believers all over the world. And together, we will pronounce you “saved, rescued, redeemed, forever-declared child of God.”