

Baptism – the way of life

What a glorious day! It is our privilege to have Elaine and Scott and their new baby, Brayden, who many of you may know as Mary Gaffey's great-grandson, who will be baptized. I woke up this morning thinking, 'Today's the day!' Today we will be celebrating the sacrament of baptism for Brayden, who will be the first baby I will ever baptize. It is a privilege and an honor to welcome him into God's family, and our family here at St. Timothy's.

It is a special day, a day of re-birth for Brayden, and of re-birth and re-newal for our community. Every time we welcome a new member, especially through baptism, we celebrate the growth of God's kingdom – today we will especially celebrate Brayden, and his life and promise as a child of God.

Celebrating baptism on this bright Sunday morning, surrounded by light and joy and beautiful music, makes me wonder whether the first ancient converts of the Early Church would recognize what we are doing here today.

Being baptized in the early church was a frightening affair, undertaken mostly by adult converts. We are told by the pilgrim Egeria that, in Jerusalem, catechumens – or people seeking baptism – began each of the 40 days of Lent with an exorcism. Each catechumen would be worked over by a team of exorcists, who would purposely try to frighten him or her. The candidates would fast and pray throughout the 40 days, studying scripture and the teachings of the church. Egeria records that, over the course of the 40 days, the Jerusalem catechumens would make their way through all of Scripture. Then, in the middle of the night just before Easter, the actual baptism would take place – each candidate stripped naked in a pool of water, was interrogated by a team of priests and deacons, and was then thrust underwater three times in order to simulate drowning. No delicate sprinkling for these folks. The association with death, and drowning, was made more clear by the construction of baptismal fonts: many were shaped like sarcophagi, mausoleums, or even the cross of Christ itself.

We now tend to focus on the joy, the sweetness and light, that comes along with baptism: apart from baptizing at the Easter vigil, most of our baptisms are done in the morning, sun shining, rather than at midnight; we mostly baptize babies, which makes it almost impossible to think about the whole 'rejection of Satan' thing. But the early church, especially in the 4th and 5th centuries, took baptism's association with death and the power of evil very seriously indeed.

Paul's lesson from the Ephesians sounds like something that might have been read at such a baptism: Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, Paul warns. Paul goes on to paint a

picture of a warrior, wearing a shield and buckler, helmet and sword; ready to slay the enemy.

This language, about evil and death associated with militaristic violence, sounds so out of place at an occasion like baptism. These verses from Paul are often the ones used to justify war and other types of violent death. Aren't we supposed to be celebrating a sort of birth-day, a joyous and peaceful occasion focused around an infant? What place does Paul's Christian warrior have at a baptism?

"Put on the whole armor of God," instructs Paul. "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Take up the belt of truth, the shield of faith, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Arm yourselves, not with tools of violence that will shed blood, but rather with the Gospel of Peace. Choose the way of life, rather than the way of death.

Paul's call is a call to choose one path – the path of Jesus – over another – the path of death and violence. Not only does Paul reject evil and everything associated with it, but he transforms it: we are no longer to pick up swords; instead we are to choose the Spirit. We are no longer to put on armor to fight our fellow human beings; instead, we choose to proclaim the Gospel to those who would be our enemies.

Paul has done for military armor – swords, shields, arrows – much what Jesus did for the cross. Jesus transformed the meaning of the cross by dying upon it, and rising again. Before his death, the cross was simply two wooden beams, upon which thousands of people died at the hands of the Roman empire. By dying, and rising again, Jesus transformed the cross into a symbol of hope for billions of people throughout time.

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, in his famous series of homilies on baptism, explains how early Christians understood this relationship between symbolic death and life in Christ: "What a strange and astonishing situation!" he writes. "We did not really die, we were not really buried, we did not really hang from a cross and rise again. Our imitation was symbolic, but our salvation a reality." It is this transformation – this transformation of death into life – that we celebrate today. We now tend to look forward, towards the community and the new life offered by Christ – rather than back, towards the evil which we reject. Thank goodness our baptismal rite now reflects that, because I'm not sure that the church would ever grow if we still required exorcisms and near-drowning in order to be baptized.

Instead, we offer symbols of light and life: a baptismal candle to symbolize Jesus' light in the world; anointing with oil to mark the Holy Spirit's life in Brayden; the waiting arms of a joyous community, hands which will clap to welcome our newest member.

Today, we celebrate Brayden's entry into the community of those who have passed through the water in order to receive new life. He joins Noah and those who survived the flood; Moses and Miriam and those who passed through the Red Sea; Jesus, who passed through the waters of birth and received baptism in the Jordan; and finally, Brayden joins us: the community of the baptized that seeks to transform death into life.

Let us now renew our own baptisms by joining Brayden, his parents and godparents in celebrating the Sacrament of Baptism.