

Today at St. George's we are baptizing two brothers, Austin John Watts and Clarke Bennett Watts. Any time another person is baptized is an appropriate time to ask ourselves, "How important is my own baptism to me?"

Think of it this way: if your baptism could be revoked and your status as a baptized person was taken away from you, would it matter? Would you lose any sleep over it? If baptisms were stale dated, had a "best before" date after which they were no longer valid and expired, would you get it renewed? Why, or why not? If one day you received a registered letter in the mail from the Human Resources Department of Heaven beginning with the line, "We regret to inform you that you no longer are baptized ...", how would you react?

Do you ever spend time thinking about what it means for you to be baptized? I must admit that I do not. I do not wake up every morning wondering how my being a baptized Christian is going to affect the things I do, and say, and think that day. But I wonder how my life might be different if I did approach each day that way, placing more emphasis on the fact that I am baptized. Exactly what difference does it make to you that you are baptized?

Baptisms typically are delightful, joyful events. They are highlights in a family's life, and they are highlights in the life of parish congregations, the church families into which the newly baptized are welcomed. Yet baptism also has a deeply serious side to it. For example, later in our worship service today when the water for the baptisms is blessed, these words will be spoken: Jesus "suffered the baptism of his own death and resurrection, setting us free from the bondage of sin and death, opening to us the joy and freedom of everlasting life." If you believe those statements are true and not just lofty words that we promptly discard at the end of the worship service, you must ask yourself how exactly your baptismal beliefs should shape how you live.

Sometimes at baptisms I tell this story describing the baptismal ceremony for a baby that occurred in a tiny church in an impoverished village in Central America. Any time I think of baptism this story comes to mind because despite its somewhat disturbing symbolism the story captures perfectly, for me at least, both the seriousness and the joyfulness of baptism. In addition, the story is a reminder how those who live in inescapable poverty experience Christianity more vividly than do others.

The day of the baptism, the poorly dressed congregation gathered in their simple little church. They began the service just as we did today; they sang hymns and heard readings from Holy Scripture recalling God's gracious acts toward God's people throughout time. Then, they turned their attention to the baptism.

As a little procession moved along the short aisle from the back to the front of the church, the congregation sang a very mournful hymn, like you would hear at a funeral. The procession consisted of the child's father, who carried a small child's coffin he had made from scrap wood scrounged in his ghetto neighbourhood. Beside him was the child's mother, who carried a bucket of water from the community well. The priest followed behind them, carrying their sleeping infant wrapped in a blanket.

When they reached the chancel, the father placed the tiny coffin on the altar, the mother poured the water into the coffin, and the priest covered the baby, who was just wakening from its sleep, in embalming oil, as though preparing a corpse for burial. By this point the funereal singing of the congregation had softened to a whisper. The priest slowly lowered the infant into the water-filled coffin, fully immersing the child. As he did so, he exclaimed, "I kill you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." At which point the baby's parents and the congregation shouted "Amen! Then, quickly lifting the child into the air for all to see, the priest declared, "And I resurrect you that you might love and serve the Lord!" Whereupon the congregation immediately broke into a joyous Easter hymn.

The ceremony was not quite over yet. Next, the priest anointed the child with oils symbolizing new birth, and he dressed the child in a beautiful homemade white robe. Once again, the singing in the church quieted as the priest made the sign of the cross on the child's forehead and he said, "I brand

you with the sign of Christ so that you and the world will always know who you are and to whom you belong.” Finally, the people of the congregation, still singing, came forward and encircled the baby, welcoming the newest member of their church family. The newest member of God’s family.

There is something deeply serious about baptism – my baptism, your baptism, and today Austin’s and Clarke’s baptism – that was captured perfectly in that little Latin American church. We have no way of knowing when someone, young or old, is baptized, what they will make of their baptism. We don’t know how important a role their baptism will play in their life. We have no way of telling what Austin and Clarke might or might not do with their lives in order that, in the words of that Latin American priest in the story, “They and the world will always know who they are and to whom they belong.”

The only thing we know for certain is what we have done, or not done, and what we plan to do, or not do with our own baptism.

Immediately after the water of baptism is poured on the head of Austin and Clarke, I will make a little sign of the cross on their forehead and say, “I sign you with the cross, and mark you as Christ’s own forever.” At the end of the baptismal service, you can look closely at both boys, but you will not see any evidence of that cross. It will be gone. With baptism we leave no physical indication to tell the world that someone has been marked as Christ’s own forever. There is nothing about your physical appearance or my physical appearance, or Austin’s and Clarke’s physical appearance, that reveals to the world that we are baptized.

That is why I find so powerful the symbolism behind the words that were spoken in that story I told you, of how the priest made the sign of the cross on the infant’s forehead and said, “I brand you with the sign of Christ so that you and the world will always know who you are and to whom you belong.”

A brand is permanent. A brand goes deep. A brand physically changes us. If we took our baptism as seriously as we should, it would brand us. It would permanently change us. The love and the faith, the courage and the hope that is baptism would reach into the deepest innermost recesses of our body and soul and reshape us for the better. How could it be otherwise? Baptism marks us as Christ’s own forever.

Happily, we don’t brand or otherwise change a person’s physical appearance when we baptize them. But it is possible to be changed by our baptism, no matter how long ago it occurred. Being changed is the whole point of baptism. Dying to imperfect old ways and striving to be reborn into a new way of living in God is the message of our baptism. Indeed, baptism becomes a pointless exercise if we are not changed by it, either now or in the future.

**Amen.**

**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**17 July 2022**

**Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming**