

Center of the Sanctuary: Wade in the Water

Leviticus 22:6-8; Matthew 3:11-17

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I don't quite know if this next sermon series is going to work....

I've spent time in a lot of different sanctuaries—it's just one of the things that you do as a divinity student and as a pastor. They're all a little bit different. Some opt for clear windows and natural light; some for stained glass windows that don't really let the outside world in as much. Here, of course, we have neither stained glass nor clear windows. Some churches opt for warm colors and some for cooler colors. Some are ornate, with lots of images or fine marble or wood carvings; some are plain, maybe just white walls and the color from the carpet.

I've also spent time in sanctuaries that were built for multiple denominations—Baptist, of course, but also Catholic, Quaker, Methodist, Moravian, Presbyterian...it's a long list. We live in an era where denominationalism doesn't hold the same weight that it once did, but I've found that Baptist sanctuaries nearly always have five things right in the middle, almost forming a line, and that other denominations often don't have those five things in the middle.

We have these items in the center of our sanctuary because they are at the center of our worship; as a result, they are also often central to our faith experience. So today is the first in a five-week series that examines these five items, pondering what they represent and the role they play in our pursuit of authentic, meaningful worship of God. As I said earlier, I have no idea if it's going to work...but we'll give it a shot.

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Shortly after Jennifer and I were married, her parents were living in London, and we went to visit them at Thanksgiving, essentially celebrating the settlement of America by returning to Europe. We were there for about a week, and on Sunday morning we walked from her parents' flat two blocks to the neighborhood church to see what their worship service was like. After the service ended, we introduced ourselves to the pastor, and she seemed excited and surprised to learn that we were American and that I was a Baptist minister.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "This church was built as a Baptist church!"

This puzzled me a little, because it was missing something that I'd seen in every other Baptist church I'd ever been in: it didn't seem to have a permanent baptistery. I wondered if the sanctuary had been remodeled at some point, especially since the building no longer housed a Baptist church. Curiosity got the better of me, and I asked if the room had been built with a baptistery.

"Of course," the pastor told us. She then led us to the front and lifted up part of the dais, revealing the pool that waiting to be filled with water. It hadn't been used in quite a while, but she was proud that it was there.

If you are Baptist, you (nearly always) build your sanctuary with a baptismal pool somewhere in the center.¹ It's too much a part of who we are to go anywhere else.

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It is, to be clear, a pretty weird part of who we are. I grew up Baptist, and as a child, the thought of going under the water and coming out again was a mysterious but very accepted part of worship. I watched as others took part in the ritual, and I eventually took part in it myself. After my baptism, I continued to find it meaningful and reverent when others would be dipped under the water.

When I got older, maybe even in college, I had conversations with those who had grown up in other religious traditions, and they thought it was bizarre that we fully immersed. I remember walking through a sanctuary with two friends, one Baptist and one Presbyterian, and the Baptist was explaining to the Presbyterian how it worked. He showed her where jets of water filled the tank, demonstrated how high the water would rise, and described how two people would stand in the water fully dressed and then one of them would dunk the other under the water. With every beat, the Presbyterian's jaw dropped a little bit further.

If someone were to ask me, "What separates Baptists from other mainline denominations?" the shortest and simplest answer I could give is, "We immerse." But the question remains...why? What about this strange ritual is so important, so defining, and so critical to the way that we worship?

Again, when I was little, the standard answer was "we immerse because that's what Jesus did." Jesus' baptism appears in all four gospels; the version we read this morning from Matthew is the most detailed of the four. Because of what we find in Matthew, we end up with the image of Jesus "coming up out of the water," this visceral depiction not of Christ receiving the water but rather of the water receiving Christ, completely...and so we, Baptists, also let the water receive us completely.

The reason why *Jesus* was immersed takes us back to the Torah, to the cleanliness rituals practiced by the first Israelites in the era of Moses. From illness to labor to touching the wrong kind of animal, there were numerous reasons why the Israelites might have been made ritually unclean, and the laws in Leviticus gave instructions about how to become clean again. Often that included washing in water, but in a desire to become perfectly clean, the preferred method for this washing was, whenever possible, immersion.

In Leviticus 22:6-7, this bathing is compared to the setting of the sun, compared closely enough for one orthodox school of thought to conclude, "Just as the setting of the sun occurs all at once, so too [must one be cleaned] in water—all at once."² For the ancient Israelites, just as it is for us, the act of ritual cleanliness was significant enough that it needed to be done "all at once."

We don't often emphasize the idea that we come to worship to get clean...and, in fact, I'm not sure that "clean" is the right word to emphasize what's truly going on here. The water used for ritual cleaning was not, by modern standards, all that clean. There's no discussion of scrubbing or scouring, no soap-like materials added to the mix. Ritual cleaning—both in Leviticus and in Matthew—isn't really about getting *clean*; it's about being *cleansed*.

¹ I've been to one Baptist sanctuary that wasn't built this way, and it always threw me when I visited there.

² Dr. Yonatan Adler, "On the Origins of Tevilah (Ritual Immersion)," *TheTorah.com* (2017).

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/on-the-origins-of-tevilah-ritual-immersion>

Cleaning is for our exteriors; cleansing is for our interiors. Cleaning is something that we do all on our own; being cleansed requires an external agent, something that happens to us. Cleaning is work. Being cleansed is rest. It's refreshing.

The word used in Leviticus, translated into Greek, is "καθαρος (katharos)." The English word most closely associated with "katharos" is "catharsis." Being cleansed is an act of ridding ourselves of the junk and clutter that are in our lives but also in our souls; it is the refusal to keep stockpiling tension or anger in our hearts and bodies; it is a spring cleaning for the spirit.

We baptize not so much because we seek to rid ourselves of uncleanness but because we need to be cleansed. And even when we come to worship and do not partake in baptism, even when no one is being baptized, this is a critical part of our worship. We have many goals for worship, but one of them is to be cleansed, to experience catharsis of our souls.

It is an intensely personal desire. A tremendous amount of our worship experience is communal, but there are also elements that are exquisitely individual. We have our own questions and reflections that cross our minds when scripture is read or a message is preached. We bring our own burdens and life experiences into the sanctuary each week. We pray our own prayers. And perhaps more than anything, we seek our own cleansing. Particularly in our tradition, where we believe each individual has their own direct connection to God, we who worship in this place confess our own shortcomings and express our own clutter to God directly.

The passage in Leviticus stresses "if any *one* becomes unclean." The story in Matthew is about Jesus desiring baptism for himself, as an individual, a personal step he hopes to take in his own life and journey. The desire to be cleansed, biblically, is an individual one.

Among the many things about being a ministerial professional that are hard to convey fully to others is the experience of baptizing another person. Standing in the water with an individual who had made this decision, in a room full of others but distinctly separated from the others by partition and water, you begin to feel an amazing intimacy. The other person is undertaking an action that highlights his or her direct relationship with God...and you're standing there alongside. It almost feels a touch intrusive, except you know that you're supposed to be there. It is as if you are being invited into someone else's prayers or dreams.

When we worship—not only when we baptize, but whenever we approach God in praise and prayer—we seek this kind of closeness with God.

It is not a closeness that comes automatically. Being cleansed may be refreshing, but it is also something that requires some buy-in, some engagement. It requires a commitment. The instructions provided in Leviticus are not things that can be done half-heartedly or without intentionality. They entail precision and timing, mindfulness and dedication.

When Jesus approaches John the Baptist in the Jordan River, Matthew says that John "tried to deter him." Jesus had to persist, to demand that John baptize him. It wasn't work, exactly, but it was something that Jesus had to push for.

We have, culturally, veered pretty hard away from the area of commitment. We like to keep our options open, like for things to be catered to our needs instead of choosing something that will require us to adapt to its prerequisites. You should see how my family orders tacos...not one of the meals will come as it's described on the menu.

When we choose baptism, we are embracing a historical aspect of our Christian tradition that runs against the current cultural norm. We are choosing to be mindful and dedicated, to persist and demand, to push for something that won't necessarily come to us according to our own timeline or agenda. We are choosing to commit.

And again, with this pool in the center of our sanctuary, we are choosing this as a seminal part of our worship experience even when the water does not fill it. When we come to this place, we are making a statement in favor of committing to faith, to Christ, to church, to worship.

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I suspect that these qualities that we find in baptism are present in all true faith traditions. I don't know an earnest Christian who isn't interested in being cleansed, in establishing some kind of personal relationship with God, or in exploring the commitment necessary to achieve these ends. Even traditions that do not immerse still emphasize these points; it's just that we Baptists have historically chosen to accentuate them through the act of believer's baptism.

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A few months ago, the Karen congregation that gathers in our chapel requested to use our sanctuary for a wedding. But before the wedding, they told us, they would like to use the sanctuary for a baptism. The bride for the wedding wanted to make sure she was baptized before she was wed.

They came here on a Thursday afternoon—not just the bride and her family, but many of the members of that congregation—and conducted a worship service here in our sanctuary. It included all of the familiar elements—scripture, prayer, proclamation, hymn—and yet I obviously couldn't understand most of what was said. Towards the end of the service, Reverend Crown and the candidate for baptism slipped out the door and prepared for the baptism. They soon reemerged in the baptismal pool.

At this point, something really interesting happened. The entire congregation stood from the pews and moved into the choir loft. They all closed in around the baptistery, drawing close to the ritual of cleansing and commitment, broad smiles on everyone's faces as the baptism took place. The bride went under the water, also smiling but looking a tad nervous and uncertain as well, and Reverend Crown uttered sacramental phrases.

I didn't understand a single word that was spoken, but I again felt invited into the intimate holiness of one making a cathartic commitment in an act of worship.

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When we baptize, we are saying without words that we hope to be individually cleansed, to experience something that leaves us renewed and restored, to be rid of the personal demons that have clung to us doggedly; and that we are willing to make an individual commitment to a faith that offers us the hope of this catharsis, even though that commitment unaccommodatingly requires us to be persistent and focused. This is not just an element of our baptism but of our worship and faith experience: every time we approach God with songs in this sanctuary or with prayers from a quiet closet, we are reflecting that personal choice to commit to being cleansed.

That kind of assertion isn't exactly a dip-your-toe-in-the-shallow-end statement. It's something that must be claimed fully, with all of one's heart, mind, soul, and strength. It's something that we do with all that we have and with all that we are.

We immerse because Jesus did, but we also immerse because it is reflective of the totality with which we seek to make a connection with and a commitment to God. This is the center of our sanctuary.