

Sermon for River Baptisms

Valle Crucis Park, Jason Byassee

Welcome confirmands and those to be baptized, friends and mentors and prayer partners. It's a day we've all looked forward to for a long time. I know you'll want to join me in thanking Dan and Colette Krontz for their work on confirmation. And they'll want to thank you for the work you've done to prepare for today. I saw one of those we baptized from last year, Shane Lamont, and told him how glad I was for his baptism in 2014. He said 'the actual anniversary is Monday.' He remembers the exact calendar day; I bet he will remember the rest of his life. So should you all.

Parents and grandparents I have to tell you what a wise group of 12 year olds you've brought up. They ask amazing questions. And if there's one thing we teach in confirmation it's that God isn't afraid of our questions. They want to know how faith works alongside science. One asked, if God wants us perfect why didn't God just make us that way to begin with? Good questions. But some of their questions are more internal, existential. How come I get distracted at prayer so often? Is life in the church too much responsibility? My favorite question asked last fall how do you know Duke will win the national championship? And then this jewel—does everyone have doubts like me? Yes, we do. That's part of what it means to trust. Trust without doubt is foolish. Doubt without trust is despair.

These river baptisms have become so important to us not one but two former pastors of Boone Methodist claim they started them. I

told AJ Thomas once hey, those river baptisms are a great idea. He said, “Yeah here’s why I started ‘em.” I told John Fitzgerald another time how much I love the river baptisms and he said yeah I’ve done those my whole career. Uh, ok, both of your idea. Of course in the Methodist church we don’t *re-baptize* people. If you’re baptized as an infant that’s good enough. As the confirmands know God never gets things wrong. So you don’t have to repeat things with God, when God promises to be there God is. *To re-baptize would be to tell a lie about God.* That God might not have gotten it right the first time. So we don’t do it. But one parent not this year but another year said his kid so wanted to get baptized if he’d known we wouldn’t *re-baptize*, to give his child that experience *he would have lied.* I love it! we really want in this water, and we want those we love in the river with us. The river is like God—big, beautiful, dangerous, it saves.

A few things about what we do today. One, what we do is ordinary. Two it’s big. Three it’s only a first step.

First, it’s ordinary. The word *baptizo* in Greek just means to take a bath. You’re taking a bath today, washing sin off. Jews before Jesus would seek baptism to repent and prepare for a messiah—they could do it as many times as they wanted, like any bath. Then Jesus was baptized, and baptism changed, to something you only do once. Now baptism joins us to Jesus. *All that just by taking a bath.* Just like communion is just a meal, some bread, a cup. God drenches the ordinary with his Holy Spirit. I love that we’re out here at Valle Crucis Park where folks are fishing and playing sports and swimming. We’re baptizing. It’s an ordinary Saturday afternoon sort of thing to do in the

mountains. After this you won't be any more special than you were before. God won't love you any more than he does right now because he *can't* love you more than he does right now. You'll be bathed though. Washed. Made clean. Scrubbed up. Now you'll be cold. It'll hurt. You'll sputter for air. But then when you get home it'll be like nothing happened. And that's good and ordinary. What we do today isn't magic. You won't grow four inches or learn how to shoot lasers out of your eyes. You'll just be you washed. Joined to Jesus. That's good enough to remember the rest of your life. That's how God works. God takes *ordinary* things and makes them splendid. God takes dirt and makes a universe. God takes Adam and Eve's sin and makes Jesus' salvation. God takes ordinary old you and me, and makes us saints. God takes water and makes it saving. In some early church pictures of Jesus' baptism, fish jump out of the water when he goes under it. They're celebrating. All nature rejoices.

Two what we do today is big. Let me give you a sense of how big. This water, the Watauga River, moves west of here to Watauga Lake, it slowly leaks out of there into the Holston River, which joins the French Broad, which joins the Tennessee, which joins the mighty Ohio River, the even mightier Mississippi, and the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. Thousands of miles and countless millions of gallons of water...the Mississippi runs 1.5 million gallons per second... and that's only one of four rivers sourced in this area—the New, the Linville, and the Catawba—they flow in four different directions. Can you even imagine the journey that a little of this water is on? Can you imagine the journey you're on... a vast unimaginable

journey? It starts with Christ and ends with Christ. It starts out tiny and ends in infinity. It stretches all the way back not just to Jesus, but to Abraham and Adam, it includes God's people who are alive now all over the planet and who are long dead. Your family gets much bigger each second. Friends of mine from South Sudan, alive but far away, who have been persecuted for their faith, say when it rains "God is blessing us!" A friend who's been dead 900 years, St Francis, from Italy, says this, when it rains we should remember our baptism and be thankful. You are like this water here, connected to far more people than you can ever imagine. And after today anytime you see water, from one of the four rivers sourced in the High Country to the Atlantic Ocean, from a common pond to a common puddle, remember your baptism, be thankful, God is blessing you.

Finally what you do today is a big step, but it's only *one* step. You've come a long way. You've spent all year preparing for this with retreats and meals and boot camps. You've worshiped together and hurt one another and learned forgiveness and become friends. Don't lose those friendships. Sometimes people treat an event like today as a chance to graduate *out* of church. Don't do that. This is an important step, but only one step, in your journey with Jesus.

If you will indulge me a *Lord of the Rings* analogy: when the Fellowship of the Ring is formed, nine friends will take the ring to Mordor amidst danger and beauty. They would *never go that way alone*. You shouldn't either. Life is too dangerous and too beautiful to do it without friends. Friends give us courage and make our lives greater. In the film the fellowship leaves Rivendell, and Frodo leads

the way. But he doesn't know which way to go. There's a path to the left and one to the right. So he asks Gandalf, "Which way?" Gandalf says "Go left." They try to look confident. That's the church; we don't have a clue half the time, that's why we refuse to leave our friends behind.

In a minute I'll say a prayer of thanksgiving over this water. God likes to save through water. We get born the first time through water, we get born again through water. I'll pray about Noah and his family bobbing on the sea safe in their ark from the storm. I'll pray through Moses leading the Israelites through the sea to freedom, leaving their Egyptian enemies dead behind them like our sins. I'll pray about Jesus, who breathed the water in Mary's womb, and was baptized by John. We'll remember Paul who says baptism makes us all one with Jesus and one another. That story stretches today to include each of you. You add a page to God's book today. Let's add more pages after today, ok? Amen.