

[This was a class we have each year for our 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders and their parents. We also have children of other ages attending on their own volition. This is an approximation of the class, not an exact transcript. The class and this document are written for young children and its tone reflects that. This is not copyrighted and you are invited to take it and rewrite it as needed to fit your situation. It is my gift to you.]

You are old enough and have been at Fourth Avenue long enough to notice that large box up front that opens up every now and then for baptisms. You've seen people climb in there wearing white robes or jeans and T shirts and go all the way under the water – and when Wayne baptizes them you've seen water splash all over the stage and ceiling. You've heard everybody clap and cheer like crazy and you might think that is a pretty cool thing and it might be fun to do.

It is fun and cool, but it is more than that. It is more than joining a club and it is more than a symbol of growing up and making your own decisions. It is baptism – a word you don't hear outside of church buildings very often. Let's talk about it.

Those people going under the water are joining a movement, a story, and a worldwide family of faith. It is like getting married, joining the military, and being adopted all at the same time. It is serious business but it is also a very, very happy occasion.

Christians are part of a story, and that story begins with creation and water. The Bible says that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the water." Right after God created the earth, the next thing we see are chaotic waters churning all over it. And then...the Spirit of God shows up and hovers over the water. Suddenly, where there was darkness, there is light. Where there was chaos, there is order and peace. Where there was nothing, now there is something meaningful and useful.

What you may not know is that this is a theme that shows up all through the Bible; God uses water and the Spirit to do something very

special, everything from healing people to freeing them from slavery to cleansing them of their sins to getting them ready to worship.

Let's look at a few examples.

In the story of Moses and the children of Israel who were slaves in Egypt, God saw that their lives were in chaos. He frees them from Pharaoh for a time and they make it all the way to the Red Sea. Now they are in chaos again because the army of Egypt is coming after them and they have nowhere to run. Moses told them "Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today...the Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Suddenly, God parted the water and sent the people of Israel through the water – remember that: through the water – to safety on the other side. Because the Spirit of God was with them, they were safe as they went through the water. The army of Egypt also plunged into that gap to follow them but the Spirit was not with them and the water collapsed on them, killing them. When the Spirit is with you, you can pass through the water and it means something.

Forty years later, the children and grandchildren of the people who walked through the Red Sea are facing another river. It is the Jordan River and it is in full flood state. Do you remember the flood that destroyed so many homes in our county five years ago [this is a reference to the Nashville flood]? It wasn't that big a flood but it was big enough to scare people and the river was running fast enough that no one wanted to get near it for fear they would be sucked away and swept downstream.

There was another problem. There was an army on the other side of that river and it felt very secure. You see, not only did the flooding waters protect them, they believed that a powerful god lived in that water. They believed he was the god of storms and floods and that he would destroy any of their enemies who stepped in that water. We don't believe in other gods. We believe that there is just one God, but the people of Israel believed that other gods were out there and were dangerous. Most of them believed their God was more powerful than other gods but that didn't mean that the god of that river couldn't drown some of them!

God told them that if they wanted to obey Him and live in freedom in the land they had been promised they had to do a very brave thing: they had to step in that river and walk right through it. Remember: very few of them were alive when their parents and grandparents walked through the Red Sea. This was new to them. But if they wanted to be a part of God's nation, His people, they had to do something very brave that they had never done before: they had to walk into the water and trust that God's Spirit would protect them.

The priests went first and as soon as they touched the water, it rolled back just as it had forty years before and the Israelites passed safely through the water because they went through it with God and in obedience to God.

The tent the people used as a worship center was off limits to everyone but the priests back in those days. When the temple was built it, too, had special places only priests could enter and work. Before the priests could do their work, however, they had to wash themselves clean in something called the Sea of Brass. They had to encounter the water and cleanse themselves before approaching God. The common people dug pits with steps going down into them and other steps leading out on the other side. They filled these with water and would walk down into them, duck under the water, and walk out the other side in a ritual cleansing to show God that they loved Him and wanted Him to forgive them of their sins. These pits or trenches were called Mikva or, when you had more than one, Mika'ot and were very common everywhere the Jews worshiped. Once again, to come to God you went through water.

Fast forward all the way to Jesus and what do we see? We see this hairy, wild preacher called John the Baptist who was baptizing people so that their sins could be forgiven – in other words, they entered the water so that they could be pure before God. When he looked up at the line of people waiting to be baptized he saw Jesus and that surprised him. He knew Jesus because they were cousins. He knew Jesus was the Son of God but almost nobody else knew that at that time. Still, John didn't want to baptize Jesus because he knew that Jesus hadn't sinned. Jesus told him to baptize him anyway because he wanted to "fulfill all righteousness." He wanted to do everything

that was right and being baptized was right. As soon as he was baptized, the Spirit of God appeared over the water just as it had at creation. God told everyone He was very happy with His Son and what he had just done.

After Jesus spends a few years teaching his disciples, he was arrested, tried, and killed on the cross. Three days later he rose from the dead and, after that, spent some time with the apostles before ascending up into heaven. Before he left them he told them to teach everyone what he had taught them and to “baptiz[e] them in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” In other words, we are to continue the story that began all the way back in the first verse of the Bible. We are to come to God through the water and, when we do so, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will be with us.

More than that, according to Acts 2:38 [read that] the Holy Spirit will do more than hover over the water of baptism – he will actually come inside of our hearts and live in us for the rest of our lives! All three of them will live in us. We will be adopted into their family once we pass through the water. That is why I said it is like getting married, being adopted, or joining the military – it is a grown up decision that is serious and that will change you the rest of your life.

Did you notice that word “repent” in Acts 2:38? We find it lots of places in the Bible. It means that we have to know that we have sinned – done wrong on purpose – and that we are very sorry and want to stop doing that. Before we are baptized, we have to be old enough to know that we have made wrong choices and done wrong things on purpose (and maybe even sometimes by accident...but they were still wrong) and we need to be forgiven but, more than that, we want to change. That is why being baptized isn't like joining a club. We don't go to the baptistery just because our friends are going and we want to stick together. We go because we know we need a savior, we want to follow Jesus, and we want to be Christians from now on. It is a big deal, a major decision.

When you are baptized, you are saying that you want the Christian story to be your story. You are joining a river of faith, stepping into the water and asking God to make something beautiful out of your life.

You are admitting to God that there is chaos and darkness in your life and you need Him to come and bring the Spirit to make your life new.

[At this point, I took a small boy out of the class and up to the stage. I showed everyone what it looked like to have your hands positioned in front of you, be taken back, and then raised. We talked about how this models dying to your old life, allowing the Spirit to bring you new life, and being resurrected a new person. We assured them that they did not have to hold their breath for more than a couple of seconds and that they didn't need to be afraid of the water – reminding them of what Moses told the people before the Red Sea was split.]

[I also went over the kind of words they would hear at baptism and how each person says them a different way but they would always hear “in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” They were assured that there was no magical set of words so if they heard something different they shouldn't be alarmed. I also went over the ways we “take confession” and what that means. Some only ask you to say “yes” while others ask you to state “I believe that Jesus is the Son of God.” Either way is fine.]

You can be baptized by the minister or a family member or by all of your family climbing in with you. You can be baptized by a man or a woman, a boy or a girl. You can be baptized in a river, a baptistery, a creek, or an ocean. You can even be baptized in a bathtub...all that matters is that you have enough water to model that death, burial, and resurrection that Romans 6 says baptism is supposed to model.

How old should you be? Old enough to know you've sinned and need a savior and old enough to make a serious, lifetime commitment. For some, that might be ten years old but for most people that will come later – maybe even in their late teen years. Most people can make this kind of decision long before they graduate from high school if they want to. I've seen 9 year olds baptized who grew up into great people of faith and I've seen people come to Jesus much later. It is up to you – but Jesus said to do it so think about it and make your decision when you are ready to.

Are you saved right now? Yes! Salvation is not just a one time event but a journey. Right now you believe in Jesus, love him, and love

coming to church and Bible class. You are disciples already [discuss what that word means]. When the time comes that you know you need a savior, it is time to cross the water, receive the Spirit, and become a Christian.

[I took questions from the group at this point. The questions were:

1. Can you be baptized more than once? Yes, but most people only need to be baptized once. If they get older and wonder if they really understood what they had done when they were very young, we can certainly talk about that and make a decision about what needs to be done next, if anything.
2. If you were baptized in another church do you have to be baptized again? Almost never, in my opinion. If you were immersed because you wanted to belong to Jesus and be a Christian, I see no reason to rebaptize you merely because where you were baptized had another name on the door.
3. If you were baptized as a baby, do you have to be baptized again or are you a Christian? I would never question your faith or your salvation. That said, I would like to talk you into making your own decision and going through the process the way the first Christians did. They didn't get a little wet – they went through the water. And it wasn't because of the faith of their parents but because of their OWN faith that they went into the water and received the Spirit. Being immersed is a sign that you are making your own decision and I would love to see you do that.