

## A VERY GOOD PLACE TO START

Pastor Hubert at Pinegrove, Nov. 1, 2015



Did you notice what just happened, when Jamie and Ellen (*all actual names have been altered*) were baptized? Or rather, did you notice what NOT happened? Jamie and Ellen are still here! God didn't whisk them away to live happily ever after in heaven. It can't be because they're still so young, because I'm pretty sure that there are tons of grown-ups who get baptized and are still with us. In fact, I know a guy in his early seventies who got baptized recently, and *he's* still around.

Of course I'm saying that with my tongue firmly planted in my cheek here. The point I want to make, though, is that baptism is not a ticket to heaven - either now or when we die. And likewise, it's not some divine detergent that washes away our sins. Jamie and Ellen are much too young to even know what the word sin means!

So if it's not about going to heaven, and if it's not about getting God or Jesus bailing us out from sin - then what *is* it about...? Well, it's about making a brand new start. It's about God inviting us to be part of God's dream for this creation, and us saying "yes!" to it. So baptism is not the *end* of the line, something you do to have it over and done with so you can move on with your life. On the contrary, baptism is where everything *begins*. It's a start, a very good start.

In the movie "The Sound of Music" Maria was very sensible when she sang,  
"Let's start at the very beginning,  
A very good place to start,  
When you read you begin with A B C,  
When you sing you begin with Do Re Me."

And as Christians, we "begin with Bap-ti-sm"; a very good place to start, indeed!

Do you remember when Jesus was baptized? It wasn't in the middle of his ministry or near the end or at some random moment - it was right at the beginning of his ministry, when he was about to start proclaiming and living God's kingdom of shalom, of wholeness and justice for all. And just before that, his cousin, John the Baptist, he called the people to repent, to say "I'm sorry" to God and to make a fresh start - by getting baptized.

So baptism is a big deal. It turns your life around. Instead of saying, "I'm in control of my own life and *I'm* going to make sure I go where *I* want to go", with baptism we declare publicly that it's no longer me who's in control of my life, but God. With baptism we give the steering wheel of our life to God. Here God, *you* do the driving from now on. I know I can trust you.

And because it's all about new beginnings, it makes sense to start at the beginning: with babies and little children. Of course Jamie and Ellen are way too young to make that choice for themselves; so it's their parents, Melanie and George, who promise to God that they will raise them as children of God. They promised to try and live life as Christ showed us, and to lead their children by example.

Of course that's much easier said than done; to do that well, they need all the help they can get. So we promised them that we'd be there for them, to support them and guide them. And "we" is not just Pinegrove United Church. "We" is *any* Christian church. No matter where Melanie and George may choose to live, there will always be a church nearby them to support them, a community of faith that says, "we'll walk with you; we're in this together".

We are in this *together* - with each other, and with God, with Christ and with the Spirit. On our own, we wouldn't get very far. But together we can do the impossible; together, we can walk the extra mile.

*Together* we will discover why we were put on here on this earth: not just to consume resources - to eat, breathe, to take up space. No, we were put on this earth to make it a better place, to build outposts of God's coming kingdom, a foretaste of things to come, as it were. God designed us to make a difference with our lives in other people's lives.

In the Creation Story in Genesis we see how God creates life out of chaos, all kinds of life. And when God gets around to creating us humans, the story says that we were made "in the image of God". We carry reflections of God inside each of us. So God wants *us* to also add to life on Earth, not just take from it. We are called to be "co-creators", to continue the creative life-giving process that God started so long ago.

In the story of Ruth that we heard the beginning of this morning there is a similar undercurrent: of God offering opportunities where Ruth and Naomi only see hopelessness. And then it's up to them to act on that opportunity. And when they do, they not only survive a devastating famine, but they thrive and become the start of the family tree that ultimately will produce Jesus! Again, a fresh start...

But how? How do you give life to this world? How can we share God's dream? In the story from Mark that we just heard, someone asks Jesus that same question: "What is the most important commandment?" Basically he asks, what should I do as a person of faith? How should I live? And Jesus' answer is both incredibly simple - *and* incredibly hard: "Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." And just as importantly: 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.' Nothing else matters."

*That's* how we're supposed to live. Loving God and loving others, the two go together. If you say you love God, you also love others. Not just *some* others - but *all* others. Not just the people who are like you, but also the people who are *not* very much like you; even people you *don't* like a lot. We are called to have compassion for the people at the bottom of society, those on the margins. The Bible describes them as the widows, the orphans, the foreigners and the poor. In our present-day context they are the

homeless in our streets, the First Nation people on reserves with no safe drinking water or proper health care, the refugees from Syria asking us to take them in.

*That's* what life is all about, says Christ. If you care about God just as God cares about you - then you also care about these people, just as God cares about them. As simple as that - and as hard as that.

Pretty intimidating, right? So thank God we're not alone in this. God is already at work building God's Kingdom and invites us to simply come along. All we need to do is accept the invitation and work side-by-side with God, creating life and new opportunities where the rest of the world doesn't see any. Together, we can do the impossible!

So when we Jamie and Ellen were baptized, they didn't get their ticket to heaven or had their sins washed away. What happened there was God inviting them to come along and share God's dream, and their parents saying "yes" to that. That's a big deal!

That's why we celebrate every time someone gets baptized! We celebrate - *and* we remember. We remember our own baptism and *our* saying "yes!" to God's dream. Every baptism is a celebration - *and* a reality check, inviting us to remind ourselves of God's dream and our role in it. A reminder to love God with all that we are - and to love our neighbour as ourselves. A reminder that nothing else matters...

Amen.