

Don't Forget Your Emergency Poncho

Several weeks ago, Shelly, Katy and I got together to plan our worship schedule and how we would incorporate elements from both congregations into our worship. Now, you should know that we have a lot of fun when we get together and we especially had fun when we were talking about our theme this week. Today is the Baptism of the Lord Sunday, the day Christians remember Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. And one thing that happens in some Christian traditions is a time of remembering our baptism where we mark our foreheads with water or sometimes the minister might take a wet evergreen leaf and walk through waving it so you all get a little wet. And then we had this idea that we could give the kids all a wet leaf and just tell them to go crazy so we all go home soaking wet.

We even joked about giving everyone emergency ponchos to wear to church. And that made me think about two things: first, it made me think about how we do baptism and if that really fully incorporates all that baptism means and it made me think about my father-in-law, David Wilson.

Now, there's several things you need to know about David. First, he was a biology professor. Second, he had MS for the last 24 years of his life and by the time I knew him, he was in an electric scooter. Third, he was a hoarder and collected things that most people would think aren't worth having. Fourth, I never once heard him complain and he always lived life on his own terms. So for example, when he was still driving and saw a snake crossing the road, he would stop in the middle of the road – didn't matter if someone was behind him, they'd just have to wait. He would use his walking stick to pick the snake up so he could get a closer look. Sometimes he would keep said snake, freeze it, and then use it in his classroom. Sometimes he'd just keep it just because he wanted to. You can imagine what it was like for my mother-in-law to look for something in the freezer to cook only to find a frozen copperhead snake staring at her when she opened the freezer door. Mary Page's mom finally decided to buy an extra freezer just for the critters David found that he wanted to freeze. And finally, David loved his emergency ponchos, because you never know when you might need it.

In fact, in his scooter basket, he kept a stash of emergency ponchos and whenever Mary Page and I would visit, he would always give us a couple because, well, you never know when you might need it.

I think David would have loved the idea of everyone having emergency ponchos as we consider what baptism means for us.

But for that to make any sense at all, I think we have to re-think what baptism is really all about. My guess is that many of you may be thinking about when your own kids – maybe babies were baptized. That's the first thing I think about. For us, we dressed them up in this long white dress that had been in the family for several generations. We took pictures of them in those dresses. They looked sweet and precious. Even Julian, our little wild child, looked like a sweet little thing who was perfectly content to just sit still and look angelic.

And don't get me wrong. Those memories are precious to me. And there's nothing wrong with dressing our kids up, with the day of their baptism being a core family member. All of that is good. But if we don't also pay attention to the promises we make in baptism, we kind of miss the point. We promise to raise this child so that they might come to know God and God's call upon their lives for themselves. And that promise is all about learning who we are and what we are supposed to do. It's about identity and it's about vocation.

When Jesus was baptized, the voice of God cried out from the heavens, "You are my Child, the beloved."

There's actually only a few instances in the New Testament where God actually speaks and this is one of them. We have to ask, "What was so important about this moment that God decided to speak?" And I think the answer is simply that God was a proud parent and couldn't help it.

God wants everyone to know that Jesus is God's child. And in taking on the same rite as Jesus did, we too claim that identity for ourselves. Baptism is about claiming our identity as God's children. It's about claiming those same words that God said about Jesus for us. God looks at every single one of us and says, "You are my child. I love you. " That's who we are. That's our deepest identity.

In baptism we learn who we are. Namely, we learn that we are God's child and that God loves us and accepts for exactly who we are...full stop...period.

Now that is profoundly good news. But so, far, that doesn't really add too much to our cute baptismal picture. God loves my kids just as they are whether they wear a cute baptismal gown or not so I might as well dress them up.

But the next part, is where baptism becomes a little more of an adventure.

After Jesus was baptized, he goes out into the wilderness. He's tempted. And all of the temptations revolve around the question about how he will live into his identity. Will he seek power? Will he seek wealth? Or will he cling unconditionally to love, no matter what, even if the powers that be kill him.

We know what answer Jesus found in the desert.

For Jesus, the only way he could live out his identity as God's child was to always live out of the reality of love. And that was risky business.

Even John, the one who baptized Jesus, found out how risky it was as our Scripture tells us that the king threw him in prison. The same king would eventually behead him.

I wonder if the same way we baptize by putting a little water on our heads is symbolically insufficient. I wonder if we should be baptized in a raging river where we have to hang on for dear life to keep from being swept away. I wonder if we should see baptism as the start of a great adventure because, one thing is for sure, the God who created the universe, the God who came to us in the person of Jesus, the God who still moves among us has a long history of calling people and communities out into the unknown.

That's what Rick and Laura found out.

For the first ten years of my career as a minister, I was the pastor of a church in the poorest neighborhood in the state of Alabama. And we had like 60 kids...many of whom were from very difficult home situations. One kid, Marvin, was around 7 or 8 years old at the time and he lived with his mother Sheila. Now Sheila had more health issues than anyone I've ever known in my life. She had a leg amputated. She had congestive heart failure. She had diabetes. She had a brain tumor.

Sheila and Marvin loved coming to church. We, in essence, became their family as they didn't really have anyone else.

Now Rick and Laura were from another community and they started volunteering. Specifically, Rick came to one of our kids nights with a goal of teaching kids how to play ping pong. He was retired and he wanted to volunteer. He also loved ping pong and thought he could spend one day a week mentoring kids by teaching them how to play this game he loved. He even bought three ping pong tables for us.

Well, within about a month, the ping pong tables were all destroyed. None of the kids had learned to play ping pong. Rick's idea wasn't going to work. But to his great credit, he kept coming. And he got to know Marvin and his mother Sheila. When Sheila would go in the hospital, which happened almost every month, Rick and Laura started keeping Marvin.

A few years went by and Sheila finally died and Marvin had no where to go. There were no other family members. And I'll always remember the phone call. Rick called me and said, "Laura and I have been talking and we want Marvin to come live with us."

Now remember they were retired. Their own kids were out of the house. There is no scenario where they envisioned this as part of their plan. But God had other ideas. We all went to family court together and Rick and Laura became Marvin's legal guardians and they raised him like a son. Marvin went home with the only people he could imagine going home with after experiencing such a terrible tragedy of losing the only family he had.

So Rick and Laura and Marvin became family. Marvin is grown now but they are still family.

When we set out on the adventure that begins with baptism, we have no idea where that adventure might take us.

Rick thought he was going to spend one day a week playing ping pong. Instead, he got a new son.

When we dress up our kids in such pretty outfits for baptism, we have to remember that God may one day call that child to do something that will absolutely terrify us at their parents.

God might call us to do something that we never in a million years would have thought we'd even consider.

Because the waters of baptism are good, they are refreshing and life giving, but they are not tame. They are not safe. They are wild and they are mighty...just like God's spirit. And they call us out into the unknown inviting us to be more than we thought we could be and to do more than we thought we could do.

So, my father in law was right. As we embark on the adventure of the baptized, make sure you grab your emergency poncho because you never know when you might need it.