

The Renewal of Baptismal Vows on the Feast of All Saints, 2009

Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44 David Schlafer

As you may well know, baptisms can be conducted any time, any place.
They don't have to be administered by somebody ordained
(in extreme circumstances any baptized Christian available will do just fine).

In our tradition, however, we strongly encourage baptisms to be conducted
in the church before the congregation on one of four Sundays:

Easter, Pentecost, the feast of Jesus' baptism (early in Epiphany),
and today—the annual celebration of the Feast of All Saints.

Having baptisms on those days, and in this way ensures
that the whole community is engaged in supporting the candidates;
and that all community members have the chance to renew their own baptismal vows.

This renewing of vows is so important that, on these four Sundays every year,
we reaffirm those vows aloud, whether anyone is being baptized or not.
Today we do have three baptisms scheduled for the later service—two of them for adults.
(That's almost enough to bring you back again at 10:30, isn't it?)
But, in case that isn't possible, we will do what our second service colleagues also do:
renew our baptismal promises, and be refreshed in our sense of baptismal identity
by having dancing drops of water flung full in our faces.

The day you were baptized—do you remember it?
Is it a tucked-away memory you can barely manage to pull out and dust off?
Were you so young, there's no way you could remember?
It isn't easy, is it, to renew your sense of what you can hardly recall?
Whenever and wherever, your baptism was, however, it was, like all baptisms, decidedly odd.

Bruce, Deborah, Joanne—

*I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
What in God's name is being done?*

Robin, Susan, Frank—

*You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever.
What on earth is going on?*

The sacrament of baptism—it really doesn't have much to show for itself, does it?

- A few drops of water—and those quickly dried.
- A few familiar phrases—said and done in practically no time.
- A few symbolic gestures—curious at best.

What in the world is happening here? It isn't easy to show the world, is it?

- The candidates come looking clean already—
what they're being "cleansed from" is by no means evident.
- The words spoken over them are solemn, indeed—
but what those words mean is difficult to fathom.
- The actions undertaken in baptism are very small scale—
and they don't generate any dramatic special effects.

Is baptism, in fact, just a folk ritual, a quaint little custom—simply ceremonial—
merely the celebration of a rite of passage?

What in God's name are we doing when we baptize? Is that a better way to pose the question? Well, it is certainly isn't an easier way!

For centuries, those who practice baptism have heartily disagreed on what it is they're doing:

- *We are turning a candidate into a Christian.*
- *We are saving a soul from the fires of hell.*
- *We are responding in faith to the grace of God. (Whatever that means.)*
- *We are making promises for children too young to make promises for themselves.*
- *We are signifying a serious commitment that only adults can make.*
- *We are just doing what Jesus said to do, just because he said to do it.*
- *You haven't been baptized unless you've been dunked—No, a tiny dribble is all it takes.*

Underneath all the contention and confusion, what in God's name are we doing?

Well, naming, for one thing—baptism has to do with naming.

"What's in a name?" "Nothing much," replies the character from Shakespeare.

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

"Names are arbitrary—convenient devices for keeping tabs on assorted 'Hey, YOU!'s'"

Granted—names *can* seem like nothing much—but there's more to a name than meets the eye.

Human bodies, we can observe, their movements we can note;

but a person's true name we can never see.

What we call folks can be written down, read, and spoken easily enough;

but these verbal markers only gesture toward a deeper reality,

a reality we encounter in one another daily—

but a reality that words can never pin down.

Our name—it's a focused but open symbol for the being we are—

which is something far larger than what we've accomplished, or what we've messed up.

Our name is a symbol for those who have gifted us, for those with whom we keep company,

for those who comprise the whole complex fabric of our relationships.

A name in utter isolation is not a name at all.

Our identities are shaped by those with whom and by whom we are identified.

Stacey, Christopher, Berndt—

I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

Marie, Sally, David—

You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever

We gather today on the Feast of All Saints—all those whom God distinctively identifies by identifying distinctively with each and every one of them.

All Saints—those who, in turn, have named and claimed their God-granted identities—particular identities they discover and share in companionship with one another.

All Saints—those who are alive among us,

and those whom—though we love—we see no longer;

but who are nonetheless present to God, and who dwell among us,

upheld in the power of Life Everlasting.

The Sacred Texts for this day depict the richness of our identities in two vivid images:

Feasts and Tears—Feasts and Tears—celebration and sorrow—each and both: How can this be?

What have Feasts and Tears to do with naming and identity—with baptism?

Isaiah envisions a gathering on God's mountain,
a gathering the total antithesis of a Washington Cocktail Party—

- All are invited, not just a favored few.
- Table conversation centers not around who's getting the best of whom; but who is hurting, and how God's tender touch is making for healing.
- There is fine food for all—not just scraps discarded from exhibitions of excess.
- Death is not denied here by elaborate media distractions.

No, death is dealt with directly; its oppressive heaviness slowly diffused,
one gently wiped tear after another.

Do you see it? This is not a banquet where tears have to be masked with makeup.

This is a celebration where compassionate care is the main event.

Baptism is like that: candidates are welcomed—tears and all,
into a community identified *with* and *by* the One who knows compassion from the inside—
the One who names us, each and all, as God's own people.

What Isaiah imagines as a death-transforming banquet,
the author of Revelation boldly expands into a sweeping alternative social order—

- A Holy City coming down from God.
- A city in which all relationships are reconfigured, all identities renewed.
- A city in which God dwells: pitching a tent of divinity on the ground of humanity.

And so, in the Creed we confess, in the Vows we renew, in the prayers we uplift on this day,
we once again explicitly identify the one who descends to identify with us.

Together, as the community of the baptized we reach up to touch God's descending city, crying:

*“Come Lord Jesus, quickly come; energize us to prepare for your city,
our hands building justice, as your hand dries our tears.”*

The author of John's Gospel has an even more breathtaking baptismal vision:

The one who comes to name Lazarus into life is the one who himself has the tear-stained face.

The being of Lazarus can be rekindled only by the sacrifice of his own life.

Yet costly though his call will be, Jesus makes it still: *LAZARUS*

- Not *“Hey You”*
- Not *“To whom it may concern, from no one in particular”*
- Not *“Old family friend to whom I owe a favor.”*

No, simply, clearly Jesus calls: *LAZARUS—COME OUT!*

Lazarus does—And Jesus tasks his disciples with removing his shroud.

So, here and now, we respond to the One who, in baptism, calls us each by name
and says to us all **COME OUT! COME OUT FROM DEATH INTO LIFE.**

Responding to the call we take our place in the company of all the saints,
joining our hands with theirs in the work of dismantling death's shroud:

- by continuing in the teaching, the fellowship, the bread breaking and prayers
- by resisting evil, and by repenting and returning when we falter.
- by proclaiming God's Good News in Christ through word and deed.
- by seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving them as God loves us.
- by striving for justice and peace, and respecting human dignity in every human creature.

By these modes of being to which we this day rekindle our commitment,
we demonstrate the depths of our own true names,
reminding ourselves, and showing forth to all the world
that we are marked as Christ's own forever.