

We should celebrate the “death day” of our baptism each year

## **Baptism is about dying with Christ. Why don't more churches talk about this?**

by [Frank G. Honeycutt](#) in the [August 14, 2019](#) issue



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On a recent bicycle ride, I encountered a dead deer and 11 turkey vultures feasting on its carcass. (Yes, I counted.) A small creek gurgled nearby and an ambulance echoed a half mile away, heading up the main highway. Several of the vultures perched on tree limbs until I departed up the next hill. Returning later in the day, I was astonished at how quickly the deer's carcass had been reduced to bones.

Death is revolting and frightening. But in baptism, Christians receive a new identity, a different perspective on living in the world. Disciples are liberated from the great fear of death by going ahead and dying before we breathe our last.

In my decades as a Lutheran pastor, I've led a variety of classes and workshops inviting participants to answer this question: What word or phrase comes to mind upon hearing the word baptism? People offer valid and biblical responses: new life,

rebirth, cleansing, forgiveness, family, body of Christ.

One word that rarely receives initial mention is *death*. Yet here is St. Paul:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Rom. 6:3-5)

It's a rather jarring declaration, and it's no biblical anomaly. "I have been crucified with Christ," Paul writes elsewhere, "and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19-20). "When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God," says Colossians 2:2. "You have died," the epistle adds later, "and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (3:3). We die to an old life and become what Paul calls "a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17).

The theme of dying in baptism was prominent in the early church. Elaborate sermons were once preached on it. The Red Sea story in Exodus became symbolic of how baptism drowns the pursuit of sin and the old life in Egypt, washing up a new community of people on the far shore of a whole new land. Baptismal fonts used to have a tomb-like quality. In the font of St. Ambrose (340-397) in Milan, catechumens descended precipitous steps into deep water—dying into Christ's body, the church—and then ascended steps out the other side to their first communion with a waiting congregation.

Martin Luther preferred baptism by full immersion, even for young children. It captures a visible dying and rising with Christ—a drowning, a death, a new creation. Yet many North American Protestants have long used minimal water for baptism, having inherited small font dimensions from European forebears. The difficulty of heating large worship spaces and the danger of drenching in winter months led to the loss of this image of death in Christ by drowning.

The connection between death and baptism remains murky in much of the church today. The sacrament often centers around family tradition and photo opportunities, and babies are cute and full of life. There also persists the misguided notion of baptism as fire insurance, magical protection from a hellish afterlife. I've received

more than a few frantic phone calls from parents who ask, “Will you do my baby?” But baptism is not some holy inoculation against evil and mishap. Jesus proceeds directly from his baptism in the Jordan River, barely towed off, to an encounter with the devil in the wilderness (Mark 1:9–13). The implication is not that baptism magically protects him from evil but rather that it gives him the spiritual wherewithal to confront it, to talk back. Dying with Christ in baptism suggests a powerful truth: nothing can get us, because God’s already got us.

To our great theological impoverishment, the church has largely lost the core image of dying with Christ in baptism. Meanwhile, North American Christians in the 21st century are saturated with news reports that provoke fear—and emphasize the need for myriad supplemental protections apart from Christ.

Christians have lived for centuries in cultures where fear and worry have shaped politics, where emergent messiahs have preyed upon the vulnerabilities of those who pray. Paul describes the church as a community that, rather than succumbing to the false promises of a temporary savior, is “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,” even amid agonizing afflictions, perplexities, and persecutions (2 Cor. 4:8–10). This identity is capable of withstanding any threat or fear that might afflict seemingly fragile “clay jars” like us (4:7).

Could a recovery of this ancient baptismal image bring new perspective to our fears? The sixth chapter of Romans employs variations of the word *death* 14 times in the first 11 verses.

Again, I counted.

Theologian John Westerhoff describes a Central American baptismal tradition in which the family members and the priest somberly process into a darkened church wearing funeral garb. As they walk, worshipers intone songs of lament and loss. The wooden font is shaped like a casket, and the child is naked. As the priest plunges the child completely underwater, he says, “I *kill* you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit . . . and raise you to walk in Christ’s light and love forever!” Postbaptism, the congregation dramatically shifts to songs of Easter praise. The dripping wet child is garbed in a white baptismal gown and screams like she’s just been born.

Try this in your home congregation and somebody will call the Department of Social Services. Even short of this extreme, there is a significant pastoral challenge involved in raising the connection between death and baptism without scaring

people away. But here's a ministerial hunch. Until congregations start celebrating the "death date" of baptism at least as vigorously as we celebrate our planetary debuts, our corporate ability to be church together in the world will be severely diminished. So will our sacramental wherewithal to stare down evil and fear. Without such a vivid sacramental identity, I sometimes wonder if Jesus is for many people much more than a good man we'll all meet in heaven someday. *Lose your life*, he says instead. *You'll find it*.

Christians should celebrate baptism as a death date: death is now behind them.

"Our rituals," writes liturgy scholar Gabe Huck, "are a kind of rehearsal. What are we rehearsing? In that cross traced over and over, we are learning the very shape of our lives, knowing or absorbing little by little how for us that cross is the weapon against evil and the victory over death." My life has been undeniably shaped by things like genealogy, regional custom, and national citizenship. But the fact that I was born to Ruth and Bob Honeycutt on May 15, 1957, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, does not describe my primary identity. I died on a hot summer Sunday, July 28 of that same year, when Pastor Jim Cadwallader poured water on my bald baby head and informed all listening at Ascension Lutheran that I was a Christian. I died that day and have been swimming around in the grace of God ever since (sometimes dog-paddling, I'll admit).

"Don't you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" There are few more poignant questions in the entire Bible. Now that death is out of the way and behind us, who knows what sort of risky life God has in store? This rich theological vocabulary once shaped the martyrs to live life with courage, liberated from fear's paralysis. Here are a few ideas for recovering it.

*Plan an annual series of baptism dates shaped by the church year.* Doing multiple baptisms the same Sunday, scheduled in advance, makes it more practical to spend several evening gatherings on catechesis. This allows time for unhurried reflection on the truth of dying in Christ and the importance of celebrating this date above all others. It's odd that baptism dates are often dictated instead by vacation schedules and extended family calendars, given that baptism means birth into a new family in which water is thicker than blood. I've met mild resistance to setting such dates; it helps to remind people that weddings and graduations are usually planned months in advance.

*Consider building a new font or moving the existing one to a more central location.* One congregation I served built a new baptismal space at the entrance to the nave, with a pool that flowed over a large stone to a larger, cross-shaped pool below. The planning committee wanted to convey the image of Moses striking the rock in the wilderness, along with an unmistakable threshold effect of dying and rising. Another congregation I served had a heavy stone font with sight lines that made it almost invisible to people during baptisms. After meeting weekly for almost a year, a ten-person study group came around to the idea of moving the font to the middle of the neo-Gothic church's center aisle. A respected 85-year-old trustee named George was one of several members who were initially opposed to any move of the font. While the group studied a variety of theological aspects of baptism, it was the discussion surrounding death and dying in Christ that was the clear turning point for him.

*Use the church cemetery for more than just burials.* Gail Ramshaw has written about a congregation in a rural midwestern community where most people remain through adulthood. After a baptism, once the sending hymn is sung, worshipers process to the family grave site in the church cemetery. They bring with them the sacramental water used that morning, with the newly baptized leading the way. The water is poured directly onto the burial plot where the baptized person will one day reside.

This is not a morbid fixation on death. This liturgical action underscores the power of the church's liberating proclamation that dying and rising with Christ has already commenced. All Saints Sunday presents a similar opportunity for a procession into the cemetery, with prayers and the sprinkling of water, pausing at the graves of those who have entered the communion of saints in the last year.

Consider also including the date of baptism prominently on church tombstones and columbarium niches, usurping traditional birth and death dates. The fairly common practice of gravestone rubbings during vacation Bible school field trips into the cemetery might spark conversations with children about the meaning of baptism.

People are afraid of many things, and it may occasionally be necessary for a pastor to name their proximate fears aloud. What's more compelling, however, is naming how faith in Christ overcomes these fears.

In Alice McDermott's novel *The Ninth Hour*, a young woman, Sally, takes a long train ride to New York to join a convent. On the way she has some upsetting encounters that reveal "the truth of the dirty world" and "its filthy citizens"—and her own

response of revulsion rather than care. So she changes her plans and gets a job at a tearoom instead, a decision that ultimately is not so peaceful: “How would she live, having seen what she had seen? . . . Knowing that stillness, that inconsequence, that feral smell of death, was what her days were aiming her toward?”

My own pastoral ministry was marked by many encounters with people not all that different from Sally, fearful of death and paralyzed by the dread of it. They were good people who had experienced tragedy, and they sought to manage and prevent future suffering—through means that sometimes competed with the promises of Jesus.

A vigorous baptismal catechesis in the local congregation can shape an identity utterly confident in Christ, whatever the threat. Jesus knows my head better than any barber (Matt. 10:30). He sleeps peacefully on a boat cushion during a storm while the disciples are largely losing it (Mark 4:35–41). Nothing out there in the shadowy future can “get” me. The perfect love poured into our lives at baptism casts out all fear (1 John 4:18).

Dying in baptism addresses a question much older than our current climate of fear. If we’ve already died, how shall we now live?

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