

**Sermon. Symbol # 5 -The Font    Ephesians 4:1-6 & Matthew 3:13-17**  
**Rev. Steve Clifton - August 21, 2022 - Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON**



In the city of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up with his parents, Mary and Joseph, there are two churches side by side. One is huge. The other humble.

The big church is in honor of Jesus' mother Mary - the Church of the Annunciation is a shrine to the event recorded in Luke Chapter 1 where the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will have a Son - the church marks the place where a young poor Galilean girl responds to God's invitation with remarkable courage and faith. And artistic representations of the Annunciation, from around world, surround the sanctuary of this grand church.



Next door to Mary's church is the smaller humbler Church of St Joseph. This church is remarkable in its own way. Beneath the church lies remains of the village that Jesus lived in, ancient Nazareth and below that is an older church, a Christian worship space from the first few centuries of the faith.

And you can tell it's a church because of this... there is a font- a place for baptism. In Christian sanctuaries, from the earliest day, there is a place for water, for baptism. There is, big or small a font. When Christian worship moved inside into buildings in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, baptisms, the Christian rite of initiation and belonging moved inside too, and so inevitably there was, there is a font.



The earliest Baptismal font found in the ancient world is in modern Syria, in a place that was once a garrison town for Roman soldiers. The village, now in ruins was Dura- Europos. Founded by Alexander the Great it was occupied by various people over time, finally by Romans and it was then abandoned to the desert when Rome left in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century

In the town there was a house, later converted, in the mid-200s CE to a Christian worship space. And the house church includes this font.

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In this space, in the life of faith we are surrounded by symbols. Over summer months we have been reflecting on symbols of faith.

- We have looked at one of the earliest symbols of our tradition, a first century spoked wheel in which is hidden the name of Jesus, which symbolically and simply communicates the great commandment to love God and neighbor.
- The boat is an old and common symbol that speaks of Christian community -----
- Celtic High crosses, symbols that carry the story of God's love from Creation to the end of things, carved in stone
- The table - we have one in our sanctuary and they are found in many churches in a prominent place. The table has a function but carries a deeper meaning

Each symbol places a different emphasis on the life of faith. If we take the cross for instance as our central symbol, suffering and sacrifice are put in a central place. Other symbols lift up other aspects of our faith tradition.



And today we consider another object that is here with us week by week, and in most places where Jesus followers gather you will find one...the font. Some fonts are very large, big enough not just to hold water that can be placed on an infant's head, but big enough for people of all ages to be immersed in.

Our font in our sanctuary is smaller and simple.



Some fonts are more elaborate. This font we encountered on vacation this year, in the Yorkshire parish of St Andrew's Kildwick. It's huge, heavy, carved from stone 1000 years ago by the Normans. And to remind everyone of its significance, while not in use it is filled with flowers- a reminder that the font is a place of life and joy, a gateway to beauty and abundance.



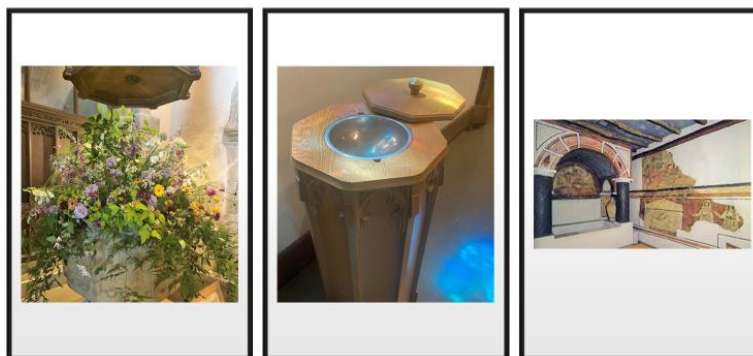
In a book I have been reading over the summer, called *Saving Paradise*, the authors - Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Anne Parker- spend a chapter describing baptism in the early church in Jerusalem. Early fonts were surrounded by artistic images that underlined the significance of the space, depictions of Jesus baptism by John, of Jesus healing, of Adam and Eve, not falling away from God but living in the Garden of Paradise.



The font at Dura Europos was framed by a painting of Adam and Eve in the Garden

New Christians, whether they were infants or children or adults, they waded into or were immersed in the font. Coming out of the water, they were anointed with perfumed oil, wrapped in white linen and given a light to carry as they went deeper into the church together.

This baptism in the font in the early days of our faith, was seen as an entrance to paradise; baptism meant reacceptance into Eden. An ancient Syriac baptismal blessing reads: "For each woman and man among you may the doors to Paradise swing wide." The Paradise spoken of is not just something in the world to come; it is a present reality too; the baptised will glimpse the holy in the world here and now.



Another book I read this summer is Marilynne Robinsons Pulitzer winning Novel Gilead. It is written as a reflection on a life in ministry in a small fictional town named Gilead, Iowa- written in the voice of an aging Congregationalist pastor named John Ames. As an aging pastor I found the book to be remarkably wise and beautiful.

At one point after a baptism the pastor reflects: *“What have I done? What does it mean? That was a question that came to me often/ not because I felt less than certain I had done something/ that did mean something/ but because no matter how much I thought and read and prayed,/ I felt outside the mystery of it...”* The font is a symbol of something greater, Transcendent. It depicts grace, gift, forgiveness, life, love, welcome, inclusion, acceptance, blessing, hope... Baptism is big. The font is a sacred symbol of something bigger. We might well feel *outside the mystery of it* all.



In our sanctuary there is a font. Often our font sits unobtrusively off to the side in this space. But when we look at it perhaps we can see that is a symbol of something more. The early church saw the font as a portal to Paradise, a gateway to the Garden God created in the beginning.



We can think of those who have come to the font over many years. Think of the joy of parents, grandparents, friends, the congregation gathered... over so many years. At this font and so many others...

As we reflect on the font as a symbol we might hear the words of Cyril of Jerusalem, written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century

“Great indeed is the baptism you receive. It bring ransom for the captive, forgiveness of sins, new birth for the Soul.

It is a garment of light, an indelible seal, a chariot bearing you to heaven.

It is the delight of paradise, the gift of the kingdom, the grace given to Gods adopted child.  
Amen