

27 June 2021
Romans 6: 1-11
Baptism: Dying and
Rising with Christ
First Mennonite
Church

When you think of baptism, how many of you think about it in terms of dying to sin and being raised to new life?

Growing up, I vaguely remember

baptism being described as cleansing, not dying and being raised to new life.

Today, I wonder whether our tradition of sprinkling or pouring a small amount of water on a person's head lends itself more to the cleansing image than the baptism by immersion method where one goes completely down under the water— "into death"—as it were.

Cleansing is one way to think about baptism. Today, however, I want to focus on Paul's description here in the book of Romans of baptism as **dying to sin and being raised to new life**. This passage significantly shaped the practice and



theology of baptism in the early church. In the ruins of the ancient city of Ephesus, in what is today, modern Turkey, there is this ancient but reconstructed baptistry in the ruins of what used to be the church of St. John the Evangelist. As you can see the baptismal pool is in the form of a cross, with stairs leading down one side and up the other.

From what we know, the baptismal candidates would walk up to the one end of the baptistry, take off their old clothes, representing the "old human," go down into the water, be baptized, walk up out of the water at the other end, and put on new clothes representing the "new human".



Baptism symbolized that transitional moment of dying and being resurrected to new life. For new life to happen, one first had to die. Like a seed that is planted in the ground must die in order that a plant can grow, so too is going under water a symbol of dying...dying with Christ.

Archeologists have found that sometimes ancient baptistries were shaped like sarcophaguses. When you are baptized, you are climbing into your grave, your coffin. Your old self dies with Jesus. You are going down into the grave with Jesus. That's quite graphic, isn't it?



Some of the earliest records we have of baptism record that the church celebrated baptism on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter. They chose that day to reinforce the idea that you were dying to sin, you were joining in Jesus' death, Jesus' burial.

I was baptized by Helen Dueck at the Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. I wasn't buried under the baptismal waters, but I got down on my knees, which could symbolize dying to sin, had water poured on my head, and was then invited to stand, a sign of rising to new life! By doing these simple, yet profound actions, I had the sense that I was **dying to something**. I have several brief examples to share:

1. The day of my baptism I died to an old way of life. Rather than listening to the voices of our world and culture, I committed myself to living a new one guided by God's voice, God's Spirit.
2. That day I agreed to leave behind my old identity and adopt a new one. In some Christian traditions that baptise infants, a new Christian name is given to the baptised infant, signifying a new identity.
3. When I was baptised, I died to a life where I wasn't accountable to anyone, and freely chose to be accountable to a specific group of Christians. They chose to be accountable to me, too.

Much more could be said, but in these ways, I died on my baptism day.

There are some who say that baptism is like a change of allegiance. Death to old gods, old voices, and a new allegiance to the Lord God as found in the Bible. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus emphasizes the cost of the new life that baptism brings. He says that to find one's life, one must lose it for the sake of Christ. The potential cost of allegiance to Christ may mean losing all the things we currently consider as important. In baptism, old allegiances die.

But dying, being buried with Christ is only half of the equation; there is also the rising to new life in Christ. Scripture describes Jesus' resurrection as a new creation. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

In baptism, we go down in the water to death with Christ and rise to new life with Christ.



In this painting we see Jesus dragging us out of our tombs, which reaffirms this profound theological point that in baptism, Christ raises us to new life.

The early Anabaptists in the 1500s rejected many of the trappings and rituals of baptism, but they held onto

the idea of death to sin and being raised to new life as a metaphor of baptism. Conrad Grebel, in a letter to Thomas Muntzer wrote that the person being baptized "...must be and has become dead to sin and is walking in newness of life and spirit."

Baptism, dying to the old human and being raised as a new one, was never portrayed as something only personal between you and God. Baptism was always connected to membership in a specific worshipping community. That is still the theology of Mennonites everywhere. You don't get reborn into your own heart, or even into the universal vague Mennonite church, you are reborn into a specific congregation. This congregation will guide and teach you and will hold you

accountable for your new life in Christ. Being raised by baptism happens in community, and it means you join the work of the kingdom of God.

Paul describes baptism as dying and rising with Christ. In baptism we put off the old, the old allegiances, the old attitudes, the old ways of life, the old hatreds, the old life, and put on the new, the ways of the Spirit, like compassion, kindness, humility, mercy, and patience (Colossians 3:12).

This morning we want to celebrate the fact that God has called one person to die to the old and be raised to new life. She wants to identify with us, one small part of the global body of Christ. Our baptismal tradition practices pouring water on the baptismal candidate's head; we don't immerse people fully under water. That said, in preparation for today, I told our baptismal candidate that her head will get really wet!

For those of us who are baptised, may God help us to remember our baptism, the time when we became dead to the power of sin over us and alive to Christ.
Amen.