

SERMON- Easter 5 (C)

Charles R. Cowherd

Acts 11:1-18

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

May 18, 2025

Psalms 148

OPENING

Today we welcome Deborah Szepezy into God's family through the rite of Baptism. I am going to preach on what that means.

The other alternative is to preach on the Old Testament,
which is about Circumcision,
Or the New Testament,
which is about the Apocalypse,
Or even the Gospel,
which is the Maundy Thursday reading (again),
and try to connect those to what's going on today.

Instead, I am going to preach about Baptism,
about the wonderful thing that is happening in our church with this young person
and her family, and this family, and with God.

The way that I thought that I would do that is walk you through the Baptismal Prep
session that I sometimes have with families, the week before, the month before, the
day before, sometimes a few *minutes* before the service on the big day.

That session differs, depending on whether the person(s) to be baptized are a child
Deborah's age, or a baby, or an adult, but this is the gist of what goes down.

And I usually bring props because otherwise people just stare at me and it makes
me nervous.

1st Question/ PROP (blue moleskin notebook):

Speaking of nervous, the first question I ask in these baptismal prep sessions is:

"How are you doing? How are you feeling? Are you excited? Nervous?"

Then I say: "however you are feeling is okay, because this is strange and exciting
and important.

The good news is that your mother will be there/here for you and your uncles Gio
and Hugo are here with you too.

And baptism means that they promise to be there for you, for the rest of your life,
as do I,

and as does this church!

I myself, though, still get nervous for big services like this.

So, before weddings and baptisms, I tell myself and those participating that it's okay if someone "messes up", and that person will probably be me.

(Wedding planners love when I say that)

The reason that we practice is because we want to be fully present. That's what I tell groomsmen and bridesmaids, practice it so you can be fully present, and so you can fully support the couple then and always.

We do NOT practice so that it looks good or is perfect.

(Wedding planners REALLY love when I say that.)

So... because I get nervous... I need to remind myself that I have done this before.

I remind myself that *this* Church has been doing this for 153 years.¹

(You know the very first person to be baptized at St. Timothy's was a boy named "William"? Guess how old he was? 11! Just like you. And there have been about 1500 baptisms between you and him.)

I remind myself that the Church (capital C) has been doing this for 2000 years.

There is this long train and we are getting on, we actually know how to do this.

PROP: My Baptism/ Funeral/ Wedding Notebook

This notebook helps me with that.

A friend gave this to me, after I got ordained,
and it has all the people that I have baptized in the front.

Then in the middle, it has all the weddings that I have done.

(Can I make the congregation feel old for a second? Do you know that Daniel Cozza, Carol Beckett, Sophie Boysko, Chris Wilson, and Evelyn Showalter are all getting married or have gotten married this year?)

Finally, at the end, there is the list of those that I have buried.

I said this at the Confirmation Class:

"Hatched/ Matched/ Dispatched" is what the Church does.

The running tally of everyone I have baptized begins with my son and you are currently the last name on the list. (Samantha, Johnnie, and Isaac, and Mary Emmanuelle, and Daniel & Mariana, and Richard & Claire, and Charlotte, and Mary and Deborah are all in between)

Thank you for allowing me to baptize you, it is a gift and a blessing, especially because during COVID I did a lot of funerals and that number gained ground, but

¹ William Henry Van Der Mark, December 22, 1872.

now the baptism number is in the lead.

So this book reminds me that I know how to do this, the church knows how to do this, and God has us throughout.

QUESTION #2

Second question, is: why are we doing this? Why in front of all these people?

We could just do it by ourselves,

we could do it online, I could just email you your Certificate.

God, truth be told, already has got you. God already loves you, with or without this service.

We do this here because it helps us understand just how important it is, just how real it is, just how precious you, and we, all are to God.

We make these promises together here and in this place because it helps us understand what's going on and what it all means.

Try this: your birthday is January 31st, you turned 11. People could have just say "We don't need to have a party for her, we don't need to have a cake. We'll just think about it, have a piece of cake at our house and take a picture."

You would have still turned 11, but golly don't we need to do something to remind ourselves just how special this life is.

A public witness makes it real, it's a declaration of who you are, whose you are, even though it can be scary, that we are pledged to do it together.

Here is the prop, the certificate here says this happens on this day, at this church, with these godparents, with this congregation, with this priest.

PROP Baptismal Certificate

You get to take this home, (our star confirmation students Paul Cozza and Greg Rixon still have theirs), treasure this and when you get home tuck it into your Bible by your bed.

It's a reminder that this happened. That all these people were here, that it was real, that it was important, keep it so you can remember this all

QUESTION #3

The really special part is, since you are older, you will remember it.

I don't remember my baptism because I was an infant, I was like a few months old.

Most of us here probably don't remember our baptisms. But you will.

I don't remember my baptism, but my parents told me about it, how my grandfather, whose name was also Charles, baptized me along with my twin brother

and my cousin, but he forgot some of the service (he was getting up there in age) so he had to do it again. Maybe that will happen here today.

That leads to the next question, when you get baptized, what exactly are you supposed to be remembering?

I hope that you remember about this about your baptism:

That it was strange, that it was different.

That you felt welcome, that people were together and they were kind and people loved you as it happened.

Here is the prop: we will light this candle for the first time in a moment. It symbolizes the light of Christ, we will sing those words. Every year, from now on, on May the 18th, you can take out this candle, light it and sing that song.

You have to wait so long for your birthday, 365 days, you can do this one midway through, it's like a little mini-birthday. You can even get a cake, in our family we have this special Red plate that we bring out every year for it. And you tell the story of this day in Virginia where the bearded guy went on and on about baptism.

PROP: Red plate/ Candle

4) OKAY last question:

Writing this sermon, I realized that my baptismal prep sessions might be going on a little long.

I actually am not get to the two last props: the font and the water and the oil.

That will have to wait till next time, we have another baptism here in 2 weeks, a girl younger than you, and her name will go in my book, she will get a candle and yours/ her name will also go in this book. *PROP: Church Registry*

LAST QUESTION, promise!

What *happens* when we get baptized? Lots of things but in Baptism, you get to join another family, that you are actually already a part of, God's family.

You already have a family that loves and cares for you. You will always be a member of your family.

But today you join another one: You get to be a part of the church. And so everyone during the service pledges to take care of you. This is kind of weird, because you don't know them. But like God, they are there, loving you. Like God, you can talk to them, that's called prayer. You cannot see them, but you will feel God, that's called communion, you will ask yourself, how did that happen, that's called baptism.

AMEN.