

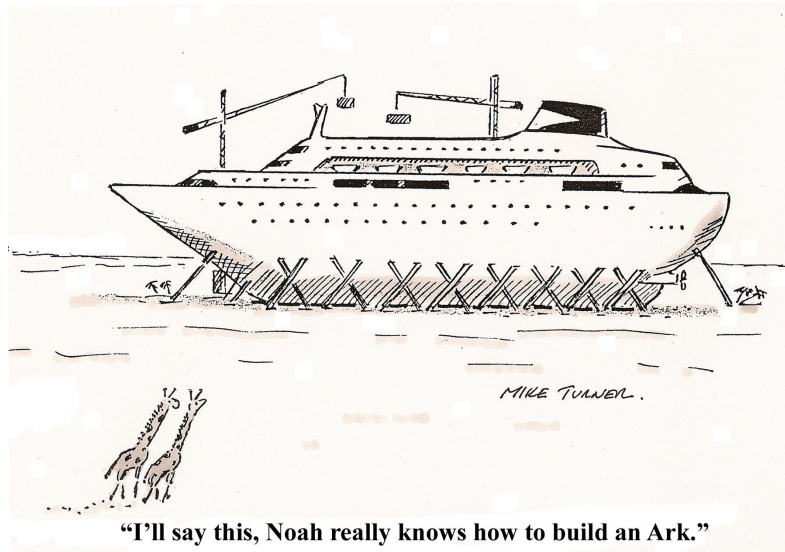
For you, little one, the Spirit of God moved over the waters at creation, and the Lord God made covenants with his people. It was for you that the Word of God became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. For you, Jesus Christ suffered death crying out at the end, "It is finished!" For you Christ triumphed over death, rose in newness of life, and ascended to rule over all. All of this was done for you, little one, though you do not know any of this yet. But we will continue to tell you this good news until it becomes your own.

And so the promise of the gospel is fulfilled:
"We love because God first loved us."

French baptismal liturgy

The redemptive journey of Christ includes a time of preaching to the spirits in prison (3:19–20), a notoriously difficult statement, which has long vexed the commentators. In context, the passage seems to affirm that Christ's redemptive work is not irrelevant for those who died before the coming of Christ (see also 4:6). Even a generation as disobedient as Noah's, for whom a flood had to be sent as an act of judgment, are not cut off from the saving character of the gospel.

Texts for Preaching, Year B



compiled by RWH for Northminster Macon — week of 2024-02-18

Monday Morning



For the Messiah, too, suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, so that he might bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the spirit. In the spirit, too, he went and made the proclamation to the spirits in prison who had earlier on been disobedient during the days of Noah, when God waited in patience. Noah built the ark, in which a few people, eight in fact, were rescued through water. That functions as a signpost for you, pointing to baptism, which now rescues you—not by washing away fleshly pollution, but by the appeal to God of a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. He has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand, with angels, authorities and powers subject to him.

1 Peter 3:18-22, New Testament for Everyone

Noah was saved from the water by the water. The waters of baptism do that for you, not by washing away dirt from your skin but by presenting you through Jesus' resurrection before God with a clear conscience.

The Message

There is a rich understanding of the meaning of baptism in this passage. According to 1 Peter, the waters of baptism have symbolic or sacramental power. But that power is confirmed through the conscience or intention of the believer; and yet the believers can only lay hold of the victory God has already won in Jesus Christ. The waters are prefigured by the waters of the flood, and just as those waters had tremendous power to destroy the sinful (and to save the righteous), so also baptism has tremendous power. It does not work superficially, like washing your hands—or on another reading, like circumcision—but it works to bring the whole person into a lasting relationship with God.

Above all, baptism enacts the power of Jesus Christ, who, in his resurrection, ascension, and power over all the lesser authorities, also has the power that baptism requires; he has the ability to bring us to God. This passage says nothing explicit about the means of baptism or the required age of the person being baptized. It does point to a theology of baptism in which the sacrament, the intention, and the work of God in Christ are conjoined. In our time, when baptism has too often become the ecclesiastical equivalent of the baby shower (for infant baptism) or of getting a driver's license (for adolescent "believers" baptism), 1 Peter calls us again to the utter seriousness of the sacrament—the mystery of faith conjoined with the mystery of Christ, gifts that lie too deep for words.

New Interpreter's Bible commentary

What does it mean to be baptized?

My baptism means that I am joined to Jesus Christ forever. I am baptized into his death and resurrection, along with all who have received him by faith. As I am baptized with water, he baptizes me with his Spirit, washing away all my sins and freeing me from their control. My baptism is a sign that one day I will rise with him in glory, and may walk with him even now in newness of life.

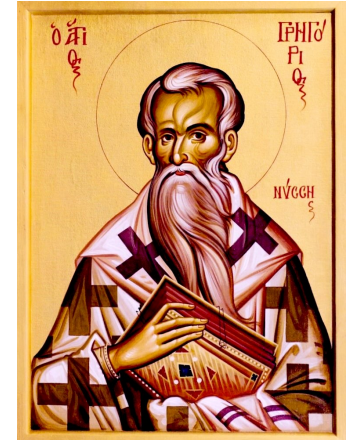
1998 Presbyterian Study Catechism

Die Sakramente sind das Höchste der Religion, das sinnliche Symbol einer außerordentlichen Gunst und Gnade.

[The sacraments are the loftiest expression of religion, the sensuous symbol of an extraordinary grace and mercy.]

Goethe (1749–1832)

Lord, from You flows true
and continual kindness.
You had cast us off and justly so,
but in Your mercy You forgave us.
You were at odds with us,
and You reconciled us.
You had set a curse on us,
and You blessed us.
You had banished us from the garden,
and You called us back again.
You took away the fig leaves that had
been an unsuitable garment, and You
clothed us in a cloak of great value.
You flung wide the prison gates,
and You gave the condemned a pardon.
You sprinkled clean water on us, and You washed away the dirt.



Saint Gregory of Nyssa (Gregorius Nyssenus; Γρηγόριος Νύσσης), (ca. 335–94)

In the final analysis, neither baptism nor faith “saves”; only God saves, and such human acts as faith and baptism are simply ways of approaching God to receive salvation.

Years of ecclesiastical tradition and popular reflection have fostered the notion of baptism as cleansing, or the washing away of sins (cf Acts 22:16), but this is exactly what Peter says it is not. Although he does not pause here to reflect on what does produce “the removal of the filth of the flesh,” it is fair to conclude (from such passages as 1:14, 22; 2:1, 11, 24; 4:1–2) that an individual does this by an act of the mind and will that might fairly be described as “faith”. Faith “saves” in that it cleanses the heart and conscience from sin, and so prepares a person to turn to God. Baptism is the actual turning; it is the “appeal to God out of a good conscience,” and in that sense, according to Peter, “baptism saves.”

If “faith” (or repentance, or the voluntary cleansing of the conscience) corresponds to Christ’s death, baptism corresponds to his resurrection. One is the inside of the conversion experience; the other is the outside. One is the negative; the other is the positive. Neither is optional for Peter, and neither is sufficient by itself; together they define what it means to be a Christian, both in one’s heart and in a hostile society.

Word Biblical Commentary