



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
1200 Marquette Avenue  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
(612) 332-3421  
[www.westminstermpls.org](http://www.westminstermpls.org)

## *Baptized for Good*

Timothy Hart-Andersen

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*Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17*

A group of us serving congregations across the country has been exchanging emails since the events of last Wednesday in our nation's capital. How do we, we have been wondering, as preachers, address the failed insurrection that took place in Washington? How do we do that without veering into partisan politics? What's the right homiletic response?

I wondered about setting aside the prepared sermon relating to baptism, but as I thought about it, I concluded that the sacrament offers a valuable starting point for followers of Jesus to reflect on this moment in our country's history. We are, after all, not only American citizens; some of us are also baptized Christians.

Baptism frames our life as Christians; we begin at the font, and we end with our baptism being "complete in death," as we say at memorial services. Baptism sets the trajectory for our life as persons committed to serve and follow Jesus Christ. At a moment when so much is at stake in our country's life, when the threats facing our electoral democracy and the very fabric of our nation

are deadly serious, it behooves us to go back to our roots, to begin at the beginning. We need to remind ourselves of the end to which we were baptized, the promises made at the font.

Thirty-three years ago, I traveled to Indonesia representing our denomination at a gathering of the National Council of Churches in that land. While there, I had a chance to explore parts of the world's largest Muslim nation.

I rented a car to explore the island of Java. One day I drove through a small town and noticed a distinctive church building set back from the road in a grove of trees. It had no walls. It was constructed so that the congregation gathered under a roof, with the gentle breezes or a strong wind on a Sunday morning blowing through – reminding them, I expect, of the Holy Spirit – as they sang and prayed and worshipped together.

I was intrigued by the architecture, so I stopped to look around. A gentleman greeted me. “Are you baptized?” he asked, tentatively. His question surprised me, but I didn't take it as an attempt to exclude, as a gate-keeping moment. On the contrary, in a land where he was part of a small and sometime persecuted religious minority, he was asking if I was part of the family. He was asking about my identity.

I told him that, yes, I was baptized – and he greeted me as if I were a long-lost relative coming home. He invited me into the sacred space and showed me around. He described the ministry and mission of the congregation. When he bid me a gracious

farewell, he urged me to return, perhaps on the Lord's Day, when I could join them in worship.

After my visit it occurred to me that my host never asked my nationality. *Was I baptized?* was all he wanted to know. He hoped the two of us, strangers to one another, might be siblings in a global family, committed to the cause of following Jesus Christ.

Baptism matters. It gives us our lifelong *identity*.

Questions of *identity* were raised this week by the assault on democracy that took place in our nation's capital. The white supremacists who violently stormed the US Capitol and those who abetted them with speeches and attempts to overturn the election were described by some as "not who we are."

*If this is not who we are as a nation, then why do things like this keep happening* - in Charlottesville, at the Statehouse in Michigan, in a Walmart in El Paso, at a federal building in Oklahoma City, at 38<sup>th</sup> and Chicago in Minneapolis?

On their way from the White House rally to the Capitol on Wednesday, the angry mob marched right past the National Museum of African American History and Culture. If they could have gone into the museum and taken the elevator down into the exhibit on the enslavement of Africans that began 400 years ago, they would have seen these words from historian John Hope Franklin on the wall, as they entered: *We've got to tell the unvarnished truth.*

t is time to tell the unvarnished truth in our land about who we are as a nation. Can we not see the painful paradox here? A country whose founding document declares that “all men are created equal,” is also a nation that supports systems of privilege that allow vast disparities in every area of life based on race. And when that gulf and those disparities are called into question, trouble ensues.

“Human beings exist at moral dimensions both too lofty and more savage than the contemporary American mind normally considers,” David Brooks wrote this week. “The mob that invaded that building Wednesday,” he went on to say, “Exposed the abyss. This week wasn’t just an atrocity,” Brooks said,

“It was a glimpse into an atavistic nativism that always threatens to grip the American soul. And it wasn’t just the mob that exposed this. The rampage reminded us that if Black people had done this, the hallways would be red with their blood.” (NY Times, 1/7/21)

Many of us have been reading James Baldwin’s *If Beale Street Could Talk*, as part of our All-Church Book Read. I asked Baldwin scholar Eddie Glaude, when he was here last fall for a Westminster Town Hall Forum, why the title refers to a street in Memphis when the book takes place in a neighborhood in New York. I knew about W. C. Handy’s 1916 song *Beale Street Blues*, but Baldwin’s book was written 60 years later.

“Every Black American knows what Beale Street is,” Glaude said. “In their community it may not be called that, but they know where it is, and they know what it means.”

We trap ourselves in unhelpful patterns when we look at actions like those of the mob on Wednesday and the response to it as aberrations. For many in our nation such behavior has been the way of life for generations. We’re fooling ourselves when we say this is not at least part of who we are.

We will never get past the question of our national identity without telling – *and facing* – the truth. Only then, *after owning who we are and what we have done*, will we be able to effect the transformation called for in our nation’s founding principles.

Some involved in the attacks on the Capitol claimed to be representing Christianity. People said prayers before the rampage. They set up a large cross, not far from the gallows that were also erected. They claimed to be doing the work of Jesus. It has ever been thus, in some parts of our land.

Nothing could be further from the gospel than their assertion of racial superiority and their violent intentions toward elected leaders and law enforcement. If they *were* Christians, they had forgotten the meaning of their baptism.

Matthew’s account of the Baptism of Jesus is the only one in which Jesus says something about what happens in the water. In response to John’s protest about baptizing him, when Jesus

should be the one baptizing John, Jesus says, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."  
(Matthew 3:15)

*Righteousness.* The word is synonymous in the Bible with *justice*. It's the term the prophet Isaiah uses when God speaks of the one who is to come: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness."

When Jesus meets John at the Jordan, he reaches back to the same word and says that baptism fulfills the ancient call to righteousness.

God says: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights...He will faithfully bring forth justice."  
(Isaiah 42:1, 4, 6)

Jesus links going through the water to a life spent in pursuit of that which is just. What happens in the river with Jesus, *happens at the font with us*. We are baptized for a purpose.

We tend to treat baptism as a lovely church ritual with beautiful babies – which it is, as we will see later in this service. But baptism isn't only that moment when the water hits us; *we are baptized for life*. That's why we don't re-baptize someone who has already been welcomed through the water of the sacrament.

Each year on this Sunday, we traditionally sprinkle worshippers with water during the service to remind ourselves of that reality of our faith. The promises made at our baptism are still active for us. All of us who've gone through the water are, in effect, still damp.

We're *baptized for good* – and I mean that in both senses of the word.

Baptism is not merely a welcome through water. It's a threshold of entry into a way of life. We belong to a global family of those who follow Jesus Christ, who himself was baptized. In *his* baptism we find meaning for our own.

I've been thinking of John Sinclair this week. He died on January 2, eight days ago. John and his wife Maxine were active at Westminster for many years, faithfully singing in the choir. John's father was a Presbyterian minister from Scotland who came with his wife as missionaries to serve in New Mexico. John was born and baptized in the little town of Belen (which means Bethlehem) in that state. He later went to seminary and became a Presbyterian minister himself.

In the 1950s John and Maxine went to serve as mission workers in Latin America, in Venezuela and Chile. John eventually became the leader of all our denominational work in that part of the world.

I thought of John this week not only because of his death, but because of the events on Wednesday in Washington. In September, 1973, a similar uprising took place in Santiago, Chile, against the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende. There was an attack on government buildings in the capital. Leaders barricaded the doors and defended themselves as best they could until they were overcome by the violence. There were two major differences in that insurrection: it was actively supported by a foreign government – our own – and it was backed by the Chilean military.

Over the days and weeks following the coup, the military began rounding up civilians and “disappearing” them, never to be heard from again. They were after those considered dissidents, those who in many cases were acting out their Christian faith. John Sinclair – by then living back in the U.S. – was sent to Chile by the World Council of Churches to try to help. He told me thirty years later about how he quietly spirited many people being hunted by the military regime through the streets of Santiago and into the back doors of embassies offering refuge, and, eventually, safe passage out of the country.

We remember John as a kindly gentleman, which he was, but in those days, he was a daring rescuer of lives, working right under the noses of those in power. John did all this at great risk to his presence as a foreigner in that country, and to his own life. His obituary this week in a Chilean paper remembered those actions with gratitude.

I doubt John thought about his baptism almost 50 years earlier back in Belen, New Mexico, as he drove through darkened streets with terrified Chileans on the floor of his van, but he didn't need to. He was fulfilling the promise made when he came through the waters. He was living out the words of the prophet:

“I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness...to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”  
(Isaiah 42:7)

We generally think of fulfilling the baptismal promise as something we do for the generations that follow us, the children, as we will today – and as John Sinclair did, well into his 90s, every Sunday at the First Hispanic Presbyterian Church in Tampa when he gave the children's sermon, week after week.

But what does that promise mean to those of us baptized years ago, and now adults? It's still binding on us. Baptism gives us our lifelong identity. As followers of Jesus we seek to fulfill his vision for the human community, however imperfectly: to live together with justice and empathy and equity, to care for the most vulnerable, and to respect the dignity of each person.

Those are also values basic to a democracy.

Our country desperately needs such a vision now for our life together. We are Americans citizens, and some of us, baptized Christians, and we're struggling now with the human capacity for

evil, found in all of us, a reality made manifest every day across this land, and as it was especially, last Wednesday.

In baptism we learn we can let go of the past, and make all things new – but not until we tell the truth, not until we face it together.

Today, let us remember our baptism into the global family of those who serve Jesus. It gives us meaning. It gives us purpose. It gives us a calling: to pursue that which is just, reflecting the love of Jesus Christ in all we do and say.

We – you and I – were *baptized for good*.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.