

I am going to begin with 2 stories that may lead you to ask “what does this have to do with baptism?” Trust me, they do.

But before I tell the stories, what is it like for you when someone says : “Just trust me”? I usually find it infuriating. The “just trust me” person knows something that I do not, or maybe THINKS they know something, and refuses to share it. It can feel like a power play. They withhold the information that would allow me to DECIDE for myself. Whether I can trust such a person depends on who they are, and what has happened in the past: are they the arrogant type who just wants to show off? Are they usually “right”? Do I like this person? What is at stake? The more at stake, the more this question of trust becomes really critical.

But that’s not the story I started out to tell. The 2 stories happened a few days apart in early December, but I’m going to tell them in reverse order.

Story#1: Back in the fall, when we realized we had usually only 2 or 3 children on any given Sunday, a few of us wondered out loud about what to do about the Xmas pageant. I thought that when Kevin said “I’m sure we can up with something” that he meant he would. But the end of November rolled around and he said “So, Cathy, got any ideas?” So I came up with an idea and described it to him. So far, so good. Then I was struck with appendicitis, which put me out of commission, a week away from the pageant. I got an email from someone very concerned about how we were going to pull this off in such a short time-frame: “this could be a disaster!” But at that point, I didn’t have the energy to outline the whole plan. All I could say was: “Trust me.” I remember the starkness of those 2 words, because I don’t usually just ask people to trust me. I usually explain, so that they don’t have to walk blindly. I know how hard it is to “just trust”, but that week, that’s all I could muster: “Trust me.”

Story #2: Earlier that week, I had my own experience of trust. When I was wheeled up to the pre-op room to meet the anaesthesiologist, I asked whether they could do this laparoscopic surgery by epidural anaesthetic. The answer was no. Sigh. Even though I had gone under general anaesthetic before, it always carries a risk. So as I lay there, I realized: I need to trust these people. I need to trust these doctors. I need to give myself to this surgery; I need to “surrender” to the anaesthetic, to the medical team’s skill and training, and their goodness, and trust that they will be careful and gentle, and not take this lightly.

And all those things that I had to do, all those forms of trust, I recognized them. The act of submitting myself in trust to another, that’s what baptism is. Here we go again.

You probably say at this point: what does general anaesthetic have to do with baptism?

Everything, insofar as going under general anaesthetic is like entering death: we become unconscious, not in control; we give ourselves utterly into someone else's care. *It is one of the most profound acts of trust.* Some doctors are well aware of that. [I know an extremely accomplished neurosurgeon who confesses to a horror of the idea of going under general anaesthetic: to give up control utterly!]

Baptism is an act of utter trust, except not through a drug that takes away our consciousness. Rather, Jesus extends a hand and says “Trust me.” And we take Jesus’ hand and say: “Ok. I am going to trust you with my very life. I am going to let you lead me, even into death, especially into death.” It happens once in our lives with water, and then we keep doing it again and again and again, in faith: trusting ourselves to Jesus’ love, every day of our lives.

That baptism might be about trust is not evident in the way Presbyterians do baptism. It would be much easier if we were Baptists, or 1st century Jews.

If we were Southern Baptists, instead of this little font, we might meet down at the beach, and wade into the water. Let’s imagine that.

We wade in, up to our waists. Up to this point, we are standing, walking on our own 2 feet. But for the immersion part, we have to change posture. We either have to go down, bending our knees, or back, supported by a hand between our shoulder blades, or forward, face down, a hand on our chest. Whichever direction we move, we lose some balance, we are no longer “standing on our own 2 feet.”

We are being supported, both by the buoyancy of the water, and also by another person, whom we need to trust. We need to trust that we won’t be held down under too long, and that we will come back up again.

This form of baptism helps us feel the trust part better: trust in the minister person, but really, and more deeply trust in God. The movement under the water and then up again, symbolizes death and resurrection. We go into death, trusting that God will raise us into life, that even what feels like death, is not death to God. God is not afraid of death. Death has no hold on us.

So maybe you can see how **the posture** we get into for baptism, whether it’s leaning forward, or leaning backward, or getting down on our knees, is really important. .

All these postures express something HUMBLE, some kind of surrender, some kind of recognition that we need God, that we don’t make ourselves, that we didn’t create ourselves.

They remind us that we don't stand on our own 2 feet. We do not live through our own strength and power.

Let's go back to the story we heard from Mark. It says that Jesus went to be baptized in the river Jordan, which means he had to get into one of these postures.

Some people might ask: why did Jesus do a baptism for repentance if he was one without sin? I don't know how to answer that; but if we think of baptism as showing dependence on God, then Jesus' baptism makes sense. Jesus was always talking about God as One he needed to depend on; trust in. He prayed to God; he consulted with God; he talked to God.

So : the story says that upon coming out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens *torn apart*, and the Spirit descending like a dove.

This description of Jesus' baptism seems to quote Isaiah 64 that we heard on the first Sunday of Advent; do you remember? "Oh that you would tear open the heavens, and come down."

In Jesus' baptism It is as if God is saying: I am *coming down*: not in some fury or power, but like a dove.

And then the words: "You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." These words join together words from Psalm 2, describing the king ("Beloved), and from Isaiah 42, about the Suffering Servant ("in whom I am well pleased"), to call and affirm that Jesus as Messiah is both king and servant. This was something new: king and suffering servant both?

Jesus is sometimes called the "2nd Adam". By that is meant: he decided to do something different from the 1st Adam. In the garden, Adam and Eve couldn't quite trust the God who had made them. They wanted to stand on their own two feet *without any help*. And so they pushed God's hands away, and proceeded to fall on their faces.

In getting into the river, Jesus was doing something different from Adam and Eve. He was deciding to trust. Baptism was the 1st big, public step in that.

And the heavens responded: "Here is something new!! Now something new is happening here! THIS is what it looks like to be a true son or daughter, a true human being. It means to trust one's whole self, body and breath, to God."

And the story of Jesus' life goes on from there, from one step of trust to another, until the ultimate act of trusting himself to God even in death ("into your hands I commend my

spirit.” And God does not forsake him. God does not abandon him in that.

We too are asked to trust in God, like that.

That is what our baptism is about: Jesus is the one saying “Trust me”, and we know it is no power game. We know it has to do with how we will live, and so we have to decide: can I? is this a person I can trust? With my very life? Right into death?

Life is always throwing us into situations where we are not in control, where we can't see our way through. It might be general anaesthetic, or Xmas pageant, or new job or having to find a different apartment, or needing to move to a different city, or take a different bus route, or switch doctors, or go to university, or speak in front of a crowd.....the list goes on, and it ends finally with the question of death, and how we enter into the greatest unknown of all.

Life keeps throwing us situations where we have to decide: what posture am I going to get into? Am I going to offer this situation to God and trust that God is going to be with me, or am I going to go only where I can see the ending clearly?

May we be given the grace, over and over again, to take the hand extended to us and say, “Ok”. Ok. I will trust, again. I will trust You with my life”.

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church, Hamilton ON
by Cathy Stewart