

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
January 8, 2012  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: The Covenantal Waters of Baptism.

Genesis 1:1–5, Acts 19:1–7, Mark 1:4–11

A little boy was behaving perfectly at the baptism of his little sister, until the pastor started to sprinkle water on the little girl's head. Then the lad leaned forward in his seat and whispered quite loudly: "Be sure to get behind her ears!"

Boy oh boy, this is a phrase I remember hearing from my parents when I was growing up. "Be sure to wash behind your ears." One day, I asked, "Why?" My mother took a white washcloth, washed behind my ears and showed me how dirty it got back there when I played outside. Now, every time I shower, I hear my mother's or father's voice and I wash behind my ears. It is almost like a covenant with God. My parents commanded I wash behind my ears, and I obeyed. The problem now is that when I shave, sometimes I leave shaving cream behind my ears and my wife or granddaughters have to tell me to clean behind my ears. The granddaughters are really cute when they call this out with embarrassment and disgust in their voices. "Pah, Pah, you left shaving cream behind your ears, again!" The secret is that I sometimes leave shaving cream back there just to hear them say this. Don't any of you tell them.

Moving on from my granddaughters to this Sunday, the early church set this Sunday aside in the church year to focus on the Baptism of Jesus and on the remembrance of our own baptism. Today's scripture lessons lead us in this direction where we will deal with water, washing behind the ears so to speak, baptism and covenants God has made with us.

Let's begin with "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth." The writers of Genesis tell us that "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep." In other words the creation was a bit chaotic at that time. We could say that there was dirt behind the ears of the heavens and the earth. So, God sent his "Ruah" in the Hebrew language to "clean behind the ears of creation" so to speak and make order out of the chaotic waters that covered the earth. Ruah can mean wind or spirit; or God's Holy Spirit coming like a wind. However we want to translate Ruah, here it speaks of the almighty power and presence of God that changes things for the good. This then led God to speak and separate the light from the dark on the first day and to see that this was good.

What we learn from this is that when God speaks and sends his Spirit, good things happen on earth. Heaven is opened up to our world. By this action, God makes a covenant of grace with us that says, "I am your God, your creator and you are my people, my creation. By my Holy Spirit, I can wash your face, clean behind your ears and dress you up in my image—and this is all good." And so it was, for a while.

Unfortunately, as we know, Adam in the Hebrew or Mankind in English, and Eve in the Hebrew or the Mother of all living in the English blew away this goodness, this

covenant, with their desire to be gods themselves. They led the way for humanity to allow the dirt of sin to accumulate behind its individual and collective ears.

As we know, over the centuries, God made laws to tell us to wash our faces and clean behind our ears. God sent also prophets to tell us our faces and ears were clogged with the soil of sin and call us back into a covenant with him. Sometimes the laws and prophets worked for a period of years, but humanity continued to backslide to become un-kept and unclean, again, and again. A Messiah, a savior was needed to deal with this repetition of sinfulness.

As we read in the Gospel lesson, around 27 A. D., God sent a very interesting character named John the Baptist to God's people in the Jerusalem area to call out the dirt behind their ears and command them to repent of their sins. To repent had several aspects to it. It means to say you are sorry to God and those you have hurt; to repay those you have cheated monetarily or legally; and to literally turn the direction of your life away from sin and to go forward toward God. John baptized people with water who were willing to repent. The baptism by water was an outward sign of their repentance.

People began to think John might be the long expected Messiah. But, John was not and declared that there was one to come after him "who is more powerful than I coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals." The Baptist also knew there would be more than his baptism by water. John had washed the people's faces so to speak, but he had not cleaned behind their ears or the depth of their hearts. So he told the people, "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"—the same Spirit that swept over the chaotic waters of the creation like a wind. John knew that it would take the one coming after him, the true Messiah and the Holy Spirit the Messiah baptized with to clean behind peoples ears or the depth of their hearts to save them.

And in a short time, in God's time, Jesus, the Messiah, "came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." As Jesus came up out of the water of baptism, heaven was opened just as it was at creation. God spoke over the waters just as he did at creation. He sent his Holy Spirit just as he did at creation, only this time like a gentle dove not a great wind. When God spoke, he spoke of the one who is the new creation: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Again, God saw that it was good.

We know that this Beloved Son of God came to wash us behind the ears and clean up our hearts with more than water. He came to give his life to wash away the dirt of our sins and make a new and everlasting covenant with us. As the New Testament tells us: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. (Ephesians 1:7-8a). He came to "ransom us from the futile ways inherited from our ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold," but with his precious blood, "like that of a lamb without defect or blemish." (1 Peter 1:18-19). Before he left this earth, he baptized his disciples with the Holy Spirit. After ascending to heaven, he opened the heavens again on Pentecost Sunday. As at creation, the Holy Spirit swept in as a great wind, and this time brought flames of fire. Yes this Beloved Son of God came to wash us behind the

ears and clean up our hearts with more than water, but also with his blood of the new covenant. He has also baptized us with his Holy Spirit.

We read and heard of how this baptism with water, the blood of the new covenant and the Holy Spirit worked in the early church when Paul was in Ephesus. Ephesus was once a great port city where many people came to trade goods and ideas. Holly and I had the privilege of visiting the magnificent ruins of Ephesus this past summer. It had a wonderful library, stadium and huge market place where no doubt Paul proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. I can picture Paul standing on the mound in the middle of the market place preaching.

After Paul preached, twelve men came up to speak to him. They had been baptized by John the Baptist and did not have a full understanding of who Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit were. Their faces had been washed, but the back of their ears or depth of their hearts still needed cleansed and saved by Jesus and baptism of the Holy Spirit. Paul baptized them, laid his hands on them and the Holy Spirit came upon them. Now they knew who Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God was as Lord and Savior. Now they too were part of the new covenant sealed in Christ's blood.

All these stories involving water, washing behind the ears so to speak, baptism and covenants God has made with others, are our stories, too. In our baptisms, God also called us, claimed us and sealed us to show that we belong to God. God freed us from sin and death, uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and in his resurrection by the power of God. "By water and the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the church, the body of Christ, the new covenant sealed in his blood, and joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice."

Our having been joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace and justice means that some of us have been called by Jesus Christ to serve him as elders and deacons. It is quite likely that the fellow members of Christ's body who are being ordained and installed as church officers today were called by Jesus Christ at their baptism, and then led by the Holy Spirit throughout their lives to this very service for God. Others of us have other callings in life, or God has plans for us to be church leaders in the future.

Regardless of our callings, in our baptisms, all of us have been joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace and justice. We all can give thanks to God for nourishing and sustaining us with the gift of the waters of our baptism; so that we may be fountains of deliverance and rebirth: washing away the sin of those of us who were cleansed by it."

God's Spirit moved over these same waters in the beginning, calling forth order and life." It was in these same waters "Jesus was baptized by John and anointed with God's Spirit." So have you been washed behind the ears by the Holy Spirit? If so, praise God who now wants us to share the good news of his beloved Son with others. If not, we can find plenty of baptismal water, and God has an unending supply of the Holy Spirit to do the job. Come on in, the water is just perfect.