

TEXT: Mark 1:4-11  
THEME: In you I have taken delight  
SUBJECT: Baptism  
TITLE: Illumination

First Sunday after Epiphany  
10 January 2021  
Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

On a bright Sunday morning in February, shivering in a T-shirt and running shorts, Elaine stepped into the vaulted stone vestibule of the Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York to catch her breath and warm up.

She had not been in church for a long time, and was startled by her response to the worship in progress—the soaring harmonies of the choir singing with the congregation; and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear, resonant voice. As she stood watching, a thought came to her: Here is a family that knows how to face death.

She had gone for an early morning run while her husband and two-and-a-half-year-old son were still sleeping. The previous night she had been sleepless with fear and worry. Two days before, a team of doctors at Babies Hospital, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center had performed a routine checkup on her son, Mark, a year and six months after his successful open-heart surgery.

The physicians were shocked to find evidence of a rare lung disease. Disbelieving the results, they tested further for six hours before they finally diagnosed Mark with pulmonary hypertension, an invariably fatal disease. “How much time?” Elaine asked. “We don’t know; a few months, a few years.”

Standing in the back of that church, Elaine recognized, uncomfortably, that she needed to be there. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine. Yet the celebration in progress spoke of hope; perhaps that is what made the presence of death bearable.

Elaine returned often to that church. Her defenses fell away, exposing storms of grief and hope. In that church she gathered new energy, and resolved, over and over, to face whatever awaited her and her husband as constructively as possible. She was acutely aware of being driven by need and desire. She also dared hope that such communion as she experienced in that church had the potential to transform her.

From the beginning of Christianity, what attracted outsiders who walked into a gathering of Christians was the presence of a group joined by spiritual power into an extended family. Many must have come as Elaine had, in distress. Irenaeus, the leader of an important Christian group in provincial Gaul in the second century, wrote that many newcomers came to Christian meeting places hoping for miracles, and some found them.

Shortly before Irenaeus wrote of the Church's hospitality, a plague had ravaged cities and towns throughout the Roman empire. The usual response to someone suffering from inflamed skin and pustules, whether a family member or not, was to run, since nearly everyone infected died in agony. Some epidemiologists estimate that the plague killed a third to a half of the imperial population.

Some Christians were convinced that God's power was with them to heal or alleviate suffering. They shocked their pagan neighbors by caring for the sick and dying, believing that, if they themselves should die, they had the power to overcome death.

Most doctors left the cities for the relative security of the countryside. Galen, the most famous physician of his age, the personal physician of the Emperor and his family, fled to a country estate until the plague was over. He observed, "For the people called Christians . . . contempt of death is obvious to us every day, as is their keen pursuit of justice."

Why did Christians act in such extraordinary ways? They would say that their strength came from their encounter with divine power. They believed the God who created humankind, actually *loved* the human race, and evoked love in return. What this God requires is that human beings love one another and offer help—even, or especially, to the neediest. Such convictions became the basis of a radical new social structure.

The initiation into this new social structure was baptism. To join God's family one had to die—symbolically—and become a new person. For many Christians this was a wrenching event that severed all familial bonds. Tertullian describes how non-Christian families rejected those who joined this illicit sect:

The husband casts the wife out of his house; the father disinherits the son; the master commands the slave to depart his presence: it is a huge offense for anyone to be reformed by this hated name [Christian].

Justin Martyr, called "the philosopher," was baptized in Rome around the year 140. He said believers called baptism "*illumination*, because all who receive it are illuminated in their understanding." The initiate, often shivering beside a river, undressed and went underwater to emerge wet and naked, "born again." And just as any Roman newborn would first be presented to the father to accept—or reject—before it could be embraced as a member of the family, so the newly baptized would be presented to "God, the Father of all."

The priest spoke the words of acceptance, echoing the words of God spoken in Jesus' baptism: "You are my son/daughter, the beloved, in you I have delighted."

By receiving baptism and gathering every week—or even every day—to share in the "Lord's supper," those who participate weave a story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection into their own lives. These simple everyday acts—taking off old clothes, bathing, putting on new clothes, then sharing bread and wine—took on, for Jesus' followers, powerful meanings.

This is what Elaine dimly recognized as she stood in the doorway of the Church of the Heavenly Rest. The drama being played out there “spoke to her condition,” as it had to that of millions of people throughout the ages, because it simultaneously acknowledges the reality of fear, grief, and death while—paradoxically—nurturing hope.

Four years after Elaine’s first encounter with the Church of the Heavenly Rest, Mark died suddenly. The Church offered some shelter, along with words and music, when family and friends gathered to bridge an abyss that had seemed impossible. “I’ve been to God knows how many funerals,” one friend said, “and yet this one seemed to break everyone’s heart.”

Baptism knows the reality of the abyss for it is burial into the death of Jesus. And baptism knows a reality more powerful than death: the love of God. “Into the death of Jesus I baptize you in the name of the Father (who accepts you as his own, who calls you beloved, who declares you a source of delight) and of the Son (who names you friend, brother/sister) and of the Holy Spirit (who empowers you to overcome whatever comes).

Baptism is initiation into a family that knows how to face death.

PRAYER: St Athanasios (c. 298-373) Patriarch of Alexandria

Put fear aside. Now  
    that He has entered  
into death on our behalf,  
    all who live  
no longer die  
    as men once did.

That ephemeral occasion  
    has met its utter end.  
As seeds cast to the earth, we  
    will not perish,  
but like those seeds  
    shall rise again—the shroud  
of death itself having been  
    burst to tatters  
by love’s immensity.