

Holy Baptism at St. Peter's by-the-Sea

BACKGROUND

The sacrament of baptism is the ancient rite of initiation into the Christian Church. A sacrament is something outwardly visible that conveys or communicates something inward and spiritual. In the case of baptism, the Christian Church believes that the water signifies the work of God inside a person: embracing, cleansing, and empowering. It is the moment when we are welcomed into the Church (the “household of God”), cleansed and forgiven of our sins, and anointed by the Holy Spirit to follow the life-giving ways of Jesus Christ. In that beautiful moment, as the water is poured upon or submerges a person’s head, God is doing something profound at the unseen, spiritual level.

Baptism is one of only two sacraments commended to us by Christ himself (the other being the Lord’s Supper, or Eucharist). In fact, the gospel of Mark begins not with the story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, but instead with the scene at the Jordan River, when Jesus submitted to the baptism of John. In Mark’s gospel, the story of Jesus begins at his baptism, which would seem to imply the same for all of us. In a very powerful way, our lives as the people of God truly and authentically *begin* in the water of baptism. This is the root of the term “born again” that has become prominent in some Christian circles; through water and the Holy Spirit we are reborn into a new life with God.

The earliest church in the decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection understood baptism to be of such importance that they required all those seeking baptism to enter a three-year period of study and preparation, a time called the “catechumenate.” At the conclusion of those three years, the individual would participate in a vigil of fasting and prayer. Finally, at sunrise on the morning of the Feast of the Resurrection (Easter Day) the catechumen would undress, wade out into a body of water, be plunged beneath the surface three times (some would say nearly drowned), and then walk out the other side. The extensive requirements and stirring ritual demonstrated to all observers the seriousness of the event.

While we at St. Peter’s by-the-Sea will not require quite such an extensive period of preparation, nor perform the baptism quite so dramatically, the full significance and import of what will happen should not be underestimated. We believe the Holy Spirit is no less present today than when she descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism. We believe that despite the distance of time the Church today is just as connected to the grace and power of God as those early followers. And we believe the forgiveness of sin conveyed in baptism is no less transformational now than it was then.

It is important to note that the Episcopal Church believes that baptism is not *only* something that connects you to God. In the Christian life, we are not alone. God provides us companions on the way in the form of the Church. So baptism is not just

about one individual, or one family, but about the *whole* Christian family. That is why baptisms performed at St. Peter's by-the-Sea occur in the context of Sunday morning; this enables our whole community to commit to "do all in [our] power to support [the newly baptized] in their life in Christ" (*The Book of Common Prayer*, 302). Just as much as baptism is your chance to say "yes" to God, it is also our chance, as a church, to say "yes" to you.

Because we believe the act of baptism is of such significance, it is important that all those seeking this sacrament for themselves or their children give careful consideration to the implications of what will be initiated in its sacred waters. Only those people who, with God's help, willingly embrace the commitment to grow into the "full stature of Christ" and intend to take an active role in the Church should receive this sacrament. Those desiring baptism make important promises to God and to the Church (see pages 302-305 of the *BCP*), and we should only make those promises to God that we intend to keep. If you accept the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the pathway to eternal life, and with God's help strive to live into the calling of a disciple, then we at St. Peter's will joyfully pledge our support of your (or your child's) new "life in Christ" (*BCP*, 303).

BAPTIZING INFANTS OR CHILDREN

The Episcopal Church joins with the great majority of worldwide churches in the ancient practice of baptizing infants and children. This is not out of a theological position of fear; we do not believe infants and children who are not baptized exist (and potentially die) outside of the purview of God's grace and love. Indeed, one of the most fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith is that salvation belongs to God alone and due to no fruit of human effort. Rather, Christian parents should bring their children for baptism because they want them to be part of the community of faith. They want for their child what they themselves experience.

In the baptism of infants and children, sponsors (parents and godparents) make promises on behalf of the children they present, and take on the responsibility of raising their children as active members of the Church. Parents need not promise to raise their children at St. Peter's or even in the Episcopal Church. Baptism is not "into" a congregation or a denomination; it is "into" Christ and Christ's universal Church. We ask that:

- ❖ Parents promise to raise their children in a Christian household with a deep commitment to Christian life, and that they find a worshipping community of which to be a part.
- ❖ At least one parent should be baptized.
- ❖ Typically one or both parents will be active members of St. Peter's, or were raised within the community of St. Peter's.
- ❖ The child have at least two sponsors, who may be the child's parents (see section below titled "Sponsors").

BAPTISM OF ADULTS

It is always a delight to welcome adults into the Church through the sacrament of baptism. Although we are far more accustomed to seeing infants and children baptized, the earliest Christians were only baptized as adults, so it is never “too late” to be baptized. Like infants or children, adult candidates are presented by sponsors. These can be family members or “mentors” from the congregation.

SPONSORS (COMMONLY CALLED GODPARENTS)

Each person who is baptized must be presented by at least two sponsors. For children, the sponsors can include the parents of the child. For adults, sponsors may be family members or other members of the congregation. *Sponsors must themselves be baptized, and with a clear conscience and sincere intent take all the promises of the Baptismal Covenant (BCP, 302-305).* In other words, it is encouraged that a sponsor not be selected due to family expectation or relation, but out of a belief that this person will model the Christian faith and life to the newly baptized. It is further recommended that a sponsor be committed to remain in a dependable relationship with the godchild.

In the baptismal service, sponsors make the same promises as parents: to take personal responsibility and make every effort to see that the newly baptized grows up in the Christian life and as part of the community of the Church. An unstated but additional expectation is that the sponsor promise to pray regularly for the godchild. The goal of both parents and godparents is to help form a child who matures in the faith, grows to possess their own personal relationship with Christ, and takes up his or her own place in the life of Christ’s Church.

OCCASIONS FOR BAPTISM

Baptism is a sacrament that involves the whole Christian community, therefore it is normally celebrated during a Sunday worship service. *Private baptisms are not the norm at St. Peter’s except in extreme emergencies. The Book of Common Prayer* instructs that baptisms are especially appropriate on specific occasions through the year:

The Feast of the Baptism of our Lord
The Great Vigil of Easter on Easter Eve (Saturday)
The Day of Pentecost
The Feast of Title (The Feast of Saints Peter and Paul)
The Feast of All Saints

In 2012, these dates are as follows:

Sunday, January 8, 2012 (Baptism of Jesus)
Sunday, April 8, 2012 (Note: The Great Vigil of Easter service is at 6am)
Sunday, May 27, 2012 (Day of Pentecost)
Sunday, July 1, 2012 (Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul)
Sunday, November 4, 2012 (All Saints’ Sunday)

EXPECTATIONS

In addition to the background and description of baptism above, a few additional requirements are asked of individuals seeking baptism, parents and sponsors.

- ❖ ***Attendance of a Baptism Workshop:*** The workshop typically runs from 9:00 a.m. to noon on the morning before the date of baptism. In this time a lengthier conversation about the sacrament takes place, including an exploration of relevant Scriptural passages, as well as a rehearsal. It is important that sponsors traveling from out of state know of this requirement, so that travel arrangements may be made. The Rector should be informed of all those unable to attend. Inability by parents or sponsors to attend the workshop does not automatically prevent the baptism, but the Rector will strongly recommend moving the baptism to a later date to provide time for adequate preparation.
- ❖ ***Attendance at Episcopal 101:*** This class gives background about the history, faith and life of the Episcopal Church, as well as opportunities for people new to St. Peter's to form new friendships. Each offering includes three weeknight meetings. Please stay posted for coming dates when this will be offered.
- ❖ ***Financial Commitment:*** Baptism signifies, among other things, entry and commitment to the Church. We demonstrate our commitment to the life and ministry of the Church by active involvement in its ministries, regular attendance at worship, and financial offerings relevant to one's income. While one-time contributions in honor of the baptism are traditional, *an even more appropriate step is to pledge ongoing financial support to Christ's work at St. Peter's by-the-Sea.* This is not a fee, but rather an outward sign of a person's commitment to the body of Christ, the Church. To receive more information about pledging at St. Peter's, please contact the Church Office at 783-4623.

ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES

- ❖ **Families are expected to arrive at least 30 minutes prior to the service.** For example, if the baptism is scheduled for the 10:15 a.m. service, the *entire* family (including sponsors) should arrive at St. Peter's no later than 9:45 a.m.
- ❖ There is **no required dress** for those receiving the sacrament of baptism. White gowns, while traditional for infants, are certainly not required.
- ❖ **Pews at the front of the church are reserved** for every baptismal family.
- ❖ **No photography or videography** is permitted before or during the service. Pictures are encouraged after the service.
- ❖ Families are strongly encouraged to attend the **Coffee Hour reception** following the service. This allows the congregation to greet the newly baptized and welcome any guests who may be visiting as part of the celebration.

RECEIPT AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I have received and read the St. Peter's by-the-Sea Baptism Customary and share its vision of the sacred responsibility of baptism. I will inform my/my child's sponsors of the vision and expectations described above, particularly pertaining to attendance at the Baptism Workshop.

Signature of Person to be Baptized or Parent

Printed

Date

Signature of Parent (optional)

Printed

Date

NECESSARY INFORMATION

Full Name of Person to be Baptized

Proposed Baptism Date

DOB

Place of Birth (City, State)

Address (Street, City, State, Zip)

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Telephone

Father's Full Name

Mother's Maiden Name

M: _____ F: _____
Religious Affiliation of Parents (ex. Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Jewish, None, etc.)

First Sponsor

Baptized? (Yes or No)

Address (Street, City, State, Zip)

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Telephone

Second Sponsor

Baptized? (Yes or No)

Address (Street, City, State, Zip)

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Telephone