

## Baptism and the Big Picture

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

*Olentangy Church*

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### **Genesis 12:19** NRSV

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan,

Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

### **Matthew 3:13-17** NRSV

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

### **“Glory to God (A Baptism Song)”** — words and music by RAArbogast, ©2010

**R:** Glory to God.

Glory to God, who wraps his saints in love.

A shallow stream of water adorns the baby’s brow.  
A claim complete with promises we welcome here and now.  
And far beyond tomorrow the promise will endure.  
Forever God is faithful. Our hope is always sure. **R**

Lord, because you claim this child, we offer her to you  
and celebrate your gifts of grace, so old yet ever new.  
And as this life so new begun receives your mercy seal,  
inspire us, Lord, to keep our vows with never-flagging zeal. **R**

Glory to God.

Glory to God.

## Sermon

Sometimes little things matter a lot. The old saying runs this way:

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost.  
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost.  
For want of a horse, the rider was lost.  
For want of a rider, the battle was lost.  
For want of a battle, the kingdom was lost.  
And all for the want of a nail.

Such a little thing, that nail! But it really mattered.

Yet what mattered most of all — let's not lose sight of it, let's not magnify the nail all out of proportion — what mattered most of all was something much bigger than a nail, bigger than a hundred nails or a hundred horses! What mattered was the kingdom, something really big. Though, of course, the nail was important too.

**With Abraham, God starts something really big.** Now Abraham himself was just an ordinary guy, an ordinary guy whose father had a mild case of wanderlust (cf. Genesis 11:31). But God had a plan, and Abraham was part of it. “Keep wandering,” God said to Abraham. “I’ll show you where to go” (cf. Genesis 12:1). And even though Abraham and his wife Sarah had no children, God said to Abraham, “I’m going to make you a great nation” (v. 2).

This was going to be really big. So God said to Abraham, “Lift up your eyes. Look at the land around you in every direction. All of it will be yours!” (cf. Genesis 13:14-15). And God said to Abraham, “Look down at your feet. See that dust? Can’t count it, can you? That’s how big your family will be!” (cf. Genesis 13:16). Then God said to Abraham, “Need another? Crane your neck toward the night sky. See the stars? Count them, if you can. That’s how many members your family will have!” (cf. Genesis 15:5).

Abraham would be known as the friend of God (cf. James 2:23). No wonder. God had taken quite a shine to Abraham. But all by himself, Abraham was not the point. He was but a nail, his family but a crate of nails. God had something bigger in mind. “In you,” God said to Abraham, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

By himself, Abraham is not the point. By itself Abraham’s family is not the point. The whole world is out of sorts. Every nation, every human family is out of sorts. Creation is crumbling. Culture gives way, again and again, to chaos. But God intends to do something about that. God intends to put everything right. And God puts that project into motion through Abraham. Yes, Abraham matters. Because with Abraham, God starts something really big.

**Then, in Jesus Christ, God brings something really big to its decisive moment.** It’s a widescreen scene, yet the main characters and the action look so small. John is just a man, strangely dressed and strange smelling. He stands in the river on the edge of the wilderness. People come to him one by one. They’ve been coming for months. It’s as if the whole scene is in slow motion. Then Jesus stands before John. His turn has come. Jesus is no giant. He’s no Goliath. He’s no Saul (cf. 1 Samuel 9:2). His is David’s family. Jesus stands there as a man before John, ready to be baptized. It’s all so small, so ordinary.

Yet Matthew has high hopes. He has given us in his first chapter the genealogy of Jesus: fourteen generations from Abraham, then fourteen generations from David, and then fourteen generations from the exile. Three stories are gathered up in that genealogy, Abraham, David, and exile, stories of promise, of hope, and of disappointment. But something is afoot with those stories. An end to exile and its humiliation . . . if only. A new king . . . if only. A fulfillment of the world-embracing promises to Abraham . . . if only!

Those are Matthew’s hopes, and they are not disappointed. No one, living or dead, could pull off what Matthew has in mind. It’s work for God alone. And that’s what Matthew sees. When Jesus rises from the waters of baptism, the barrier between the heavens and the earth is torn to pieces, the Spirit descends upon Jesus, and the voice of the Father claims Jesus as a beloved son. God has come back. The exile is over! The long-awaited king is on the way to his throne! And the hope of the world, the hope of everything being put

right at last, will surely be realized. No horses this time, and no riders. But three nails, a glorious defeat, and a kingdom won. God is working something really big, and its decisive moment is reached in Jesus Christ.

**These days, through baptism, God unites us with something really big.** It's such a little thing, though, when any of us is baptized. Anneke is just a few months old. Such a little child! She's no giant. Not now, probably never. And it's such a little bit of water. Not Noah's flood, though baptism is a picture of that. Not the piled up waters of the Red Sea, though baptism is also a picture of that. And not the waters of the Jordan at the threshold of the Promised Land, though baptism is a picture of that as well. It's such a little bit of water. Not the waters of immersion, though that's a good way to be baptized. Not the poured-over-the-head waters of ablution, though that's a good way too. No, just a handful of water, perhaps, running today down Anneke's face. It's such a little thing.

But when we are baptized, we are baptized into something big. We are joined to Abraham's family, to be blessed and to be a blessing. We are joined to the body of Christ, the holy church, to be ambassadors, agents of Christ the king, united in worship and prayer. When we are baptized, we become part of God's great kingdom work in the world. We fix our eyes on what's ahead (cf. Philippians 3:13), new heavens and a new earth, in which justice prevails and everything is put right. We celebrate what's coming as a sure thing, because the first installment of it has appeared through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And, empowered by the Spirit, we join Spirit-led people everywhere in work that, small as it is, anticipates the justice and peace of the kingdom.

Anneke's baptism, like yours and mine, is about something much bigger than Anneke. Yet, by the grace of God, Anneke is called to serve that really big something, to serve for her whole life. What results may come from that, God only knows. But our responsibility, of course, is to heed the call, to offer ourselves every day to Christ and kingdom. So we worship, we pray, we promise. We take bread and wine. We feed on the Word, on God's story. And we make that story our own: what we hope for and work for, what we live for and die for — yes, sometimes there are nails for us too. And the results? The outcome? We leave that to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whose name we carry and whose mark we wear.