

*“Here I Am...”*  
*Salem United Methodist Church*  
*Matthew 3: 13-17; Isaiah 42: 6-9; Psalm 29*  
*January 12, 2014*  
*Rev. Sue Shorb-Sterling*

This week has been a difficult one here at the church. God called one of our faithful members, Dick Ranshaw, home. Dick touched all of our lives. He was here sitting in the second pew almost every Sunday. Even though he had some trouble walking, Dick would make it a point to talk to almost every person here, especially the children. He would tease them, praise them, and encourage them. He could make even the shyest child talk to him. On Wednesday mornings at 9 am, Dick would join us for the Upper Room. Here we read the scripture and devotion for that day and attempt to answer the questions in the back of the book for this devotion. During this small group time we do a lot of sharing about our spiritual journey. And we get to know each other quite well.

Dick would often talk about his baptism. When he was growing up his family didn't attend church, but when Dick became a teen-ager he felt this yearning to be baptized. Around the age of 17 or 18, Dick visited a minister in his home town and asked if he could be baptized. The minister did. Dick said that he couldn't explain it, but something happened during his baptism. He felt the presence of God in his life after his baptism and he knew that God was always with him. This is what happens in baptism. God claims us and God never let's go of us. We see this in the scripture of Jesus' baptism. John the Baptist was doing something new in inviting people to repent and come into the Jordan to be immersed into the water. First we have to understand that what John was doing was not part of any Jewish ritual. It was something new.

The Jews did have a type of baptism, but it was a purification ritual. Think about this...Galilee is a hot, dusty place. Water is a commodity. It had to be drawn from a well and carried to houses in clay jars. Bathing was practically unheard of. So when the people would go to the temple to worship, there were pools of cool running water for them to clean themselves. These purification pools were meant for spiritual cleansing, but there definitely was some physical cleansing happening at the same time. Baptism was also used when people converted to Judaism. They were cleansed of their old ways and were purified to a new life of faith. But John who had no formal religious training is preaching a message of repentance because One is coming who was more powerful, who would baptize with the Spirit. The people needed to be ready to receive him, to turn away from their evil ways and be purified. So they lined up to descend into the Jordan River and receive this spiritual cleansing. And then this One who is more powerful, who could baptize with the Spirit, who was pure queues up to receive a water baptism. John immediately realizes that this is backwards. Jesus should be baptizing him. But God has another plan. This baptism would be a special blessing from God and an initiation into Jesus' ministry. The One who had the power to baptize with the Spirit is now baptized by the Spirit. Jesus was baptized by the water and the Spirit. The God who created all things including water speaks words of love, pride, and joy in this Son who will connect the world to God. In his baptism, God claims Jesus and never let's go of him.

This is what happens in our baptism, too. It doesn't matter if we are baptized as an infant, as a child, as a teen, as an adult, or on our death bed. We are baptized by water and the Spirit. We use water. Any amount of water will do to remind us that God created the water also created us. Any amount of water will do to remind us that only God can cleanse us. We are also baptized by the Spirit as God claims us. God says, "You are mine and I will never let you go." In our baptism God says, "I dearly love you and I find happiness in you." In our baptism, God says, "Here I am. I am here for you." We are baptized by water and the Spirit. Dick had a hobby of cutting out cartoons, jokes, quotes, and words of wisdom and pasting them on index cards. One of these quotes states this: "If God had a refrigerator; your picture would be on it. If God had wallet, your photo would be in it. God sends you

flowers every spring. God sends you a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk God listens. God can live anywhere in the universe, but God chose...your heart. Face it friend, God is crazy about you! God didn't promise days without pain, laughter without sorrow, sun without rain, but God did promise strength for the day, comfort for the tears, and light for the way."

We will have days of pain and sorrow, days with no sun. We will have days when our faith will be tested. Jesus' faith was. In fact Jesus was tempted right after he was baptized. When our faith is tested sometimes we run to God. Sometimes we run away from God, but God never runs away from us. And when we turn back to God, God is always there willing to forgive and to give us a clean start. One cartoon Dick cut and pasted came from Dennis the Menace. Dennis is kneeling beside his bed at night saying his prayers. He prays, "I wish Mr. Wilson was more forgiving....like you." God is always ready to forgive if we are ready to repent and turn back to God. This is why we call our Baptism a covenant, a binding agreement between two parties. God has a responsibility to us, to always claim us, receive us, forgive us, and give us a new beginning. And we have a responsibility, too. We are to be faithful to God. It's nearly impossible to be faithful to God if we don't know God. It is our responsibility to get to know God. And we can only get to know God if we spend time with God. Again, I refer to Dick Ranshaw. Each morning he spent time at his kitchen table reading his Bible along with several devotional books including the Upper Room, praying, and creating these cards. One of his favorite prayers is this: Lord, give me a pure heart, that I may see thee, a humble heart, that I may hear thee, a heart of love, that I may serve thee, a heart of faith that I may abide in thee. Amen. It is out of this kind of heart that Dick loved and served God and God's people. It is out of our commitment to God that is made at our baptism that we are called to love and serve God and God's people. Our commitment is made at our baptism either for us by our parents', by us at our confirmation, by us at our baptism at some age of accountability, or when we reaffirm our faith.

In the United Methodist Church we recognize one baptism. God is the one who baptizes and claims us. God doesn't need to do it over again. That being said, as fallible humans we need to recommit to God by renewing our baptism over and over and over again, because we need to be reminded that no matter where we are on our spiritual journey, God still claims us. When we falter and fail, God calls us to repent of our sin and renew our covenant with God again. And God is always there to receive us again. We renew our baptism because we need to be reminded that we have a responsibility to be faithful to God.

God never let go of Dick Ranshaw and Dick never let go of God. Their relationship was a baptismal covenant that was kept and renewed. Dick served God and Christ's church faithfully. And from Dick's faithfulness God created in him a heart that yearned to be like Christ, to speak like Christ, to live like Christ.

One devotion that Dick cut out and kept I believe explains what our Baptismal Covenant is all about. It was written as though God was speaking and states: "Seek my face, and you will find all that you have longed for. The deepest yearnings of your heart are for intimacy with Me. I know because I designed you to desire Me. Do not feel guilty about taking time to be still in My Presence. You are simply responding to the tugs of divinity within you. I made you in My image, and I hid heaven in your heart. Your yearning for Me is a form of homesickness: longing for your true home in heaven. Do not be afraid to be different from other people. The path I have called you to travel is exquisitely right for you. The more closely you follow My leading, the more fully I can develop your gifts. To follow Me wholeheartedly, you must relinquish your desire to please other people. However, your closeness to Me will bless others by enabling you to shine brightly in this dark world." When we seek God's face and God's will, we will be ready to say to God, "Here I am. I am here for you, too." Like Jesus, our baptism then initiates us into ministry as baptized Christians. It is up to us to discover that ministry to which God is calling us.

**Resources:** "Baptism" from [www.jewishencyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com); Dick Ranshaw's index cards

