

## “By What Authority?”

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching and said,  
“By what authority are you doing these things  
and who gave you this authority?”

Matthew 21:23

Once upon a time a ‘little boy about six or seven was standing out in front of a store window. The little child had no shoes and his clothes were mere rags. A young woman passing by saw the little boy and could read the longing in his pale blue eyes. She took the child by the hand and led him into the store. There she bought him some new shoes and a complete suit of warm clothing. They came back outside into the street and the woman said to the child, “Now you can go home and have a very happy holiday.” The little boy looked up at her and asked, “Are you God, Ma’am?” She smiled down at him and replied, “No son, I’m just one of God’s children.” The little boy then said “I knew you had to be some relation” (“Are you God?” by Dan Clark).

“I knew you had to be some relation.” Reminds me of the time when Jesus was baptized. When he came up out of the water and the heavens opened up, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove. And when the dove lit on him, a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” And then there was that later time, when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain top and that same Spirit voiced from within the cloud, saying to Peter, John, and James: “This is my Son, whom I have chosen: listen to him.”

In the Christian religion, Baptism is a sacrament of the church which affirms that we, like Jesus, are beloved children of God and precious in God’s sight. It awakens us to the Holy Spirit who teaches and empowers us to Love as Jesus loved, by opening our ears to listen to him. In Baptism, God promises many things.

**GOD GIVES YOU A NAME.** You are baptized using your name. This is the way the church signifies that God knows your name. Of course, you can know someone in a vague or passing way

without knowing his or her name. But our God is not an impersonal force. God relates to each one individually, even intimately. To say that in baptism God gives you a name is to affirm that God joins in that kind of personal relationship with you.

**GOD GIVES YOU THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST.** You are baptized, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". You are given Christ's name in that you are his. He has a claim on your life. Christ's name is now a part of your name in the very word, "Christian."

**GOD PROMISES NEW LIFE IN CHRIST.** To be baptized in Christ's name means to participate in his life, to die with him and rise with him.

**GOD PROMISES FORGIVENESS.** Through baptism we are reminded that, just as we use water to wash ourselves, through the waters of baptism God promises to wash us clean, even when we make a great mess of things. This is not a one-time "get out of jail free card." This is a gift that unfolds over time. When we are very little we may not have had much of an opportunity for sin. But as we move through life we all exhibit a leaning toward sin. In baptism we signify that God's forgiveness is as much a part of our lives as is our tendency towards sin, and indeed overcomes it.

**GOD PROMISES A NEW FAMILY.** Baptism is something of an adoption ceremony. Whether you are very young or quite old, in baptism you are adopted by a church that promises to love and nurture you, come what may. The church welcomes you as a family welcomes a new baby, with all the joys and added responsibilities that that new relationship entails. And the family you join is a large one. In baptism, you are initiated into Christ's family, which includes Christians of every belief and practice.

**GOD PROMISES THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.** The gospel accounts say that in Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove. At your baptism, God may

skip the dove, but the Spirit is there all the same. This gift of the Holy Spirit is important because it is through the Holy Spirit that God can be an active, creative presence in your life. God is not only distant and awesome, but through the Holy Spirit can be as near as your own breath (which is another image used in the Bible to describe the Spirit). (Getting Ready for Baptism, p. 8-9)

In a letter to his son, Rev. Martin Copenhaver wrote:  
Dear Todd, I want you to understand how significant it is that your mother and I brought you to the church to be baptized. Like most parents, we feel protective of you. A day or two after you were born we brought you home in a big plastic bucket they gave us at the hospital. It was battleship gray and seemed as sturdy as a battleship also. It was filled like a nest with brightly colored blankets so that you could stay warm and your head wouldn't flop around. I'm sure that, if we had any, we also would have used some of those Styrofoam peanuts that are used for packing fragile and precious items. We buckled that car seat in just right and made sure that it was secure, as carefully as if we were sending you to the moon in a space capsule. And then we drove home more slowly than you have ever seen me drive since. For the most part, that loving, protective concern doesn't change all that much as you get older. So, for instance, before we drop you off somewhere, we want to know something about who will be in charge. After all, in some way we were entrusting you to their care, if only for a time. We won't entrust you to just anyone. So it is significant that, on the day of your baptism, in the most profound way, we entrusted you to the God we know in Jesus Christ. We love you so much, and so want good things for you. We also want you to be safe and to be cared for. And on the day of your baptism we said something like this: "We entrust this little one to Jesus. In this dangerous and treacherous world, it is the care of Jesus that we entrust this beloved son of ours."  
Love, D. (Getting Ready for Baptism, p. 6)

Teegan, today is your day to receive God's promises, and to listen all the faithful promises that your parents, sponsors, and new church family make today. And may you smile widely, as your new baptismal blanket swaddles you safely in Jesus' Love.