



STILL LIFE WITH BAPTISM

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

*In commemoration of the five hundredth anniversary
of the beginning of the Reformation
and in gratitude to God for Martin Luther,
Confessor of the Christian faith*

1976

“My faith does not make baptism; rather, it receives baptism.”

I don’t remember the event I am about to report. I was only thirty-seven days old at the time.

St. Lucas Evangelical Lutheran Church, its name an Americanization of the Slovak *Svätý Lukáš* (Saint Luke), had blue windows. No stained-glass images of the good shepherd or Moses with his curly snake, just drifting shades of blue. They cast a cooling tint over the sanctuary and somehow made the roof of interlocking wooden beams mounted atop plain brick walls look even higher. The baptismal font was straight out of a catalog, an undistinguished oak affair ringed round with vaguely Celtic carvings and a gold-plated lid shaped like a chess pawn.

It was a Sunday because private family baptisms were already on the way out. But by the constituency of the congregation you might have taken it for a family baptism anyway. Baptism was a big enough deal to draw the New Jersey and Michigan branches of the family all the way to St. Louis, all by car, hence the choice of the long Fourth of July weekend for the event—definitely not any especial patriotism to mark my rebirth in Christ on the exact same day that America was celebrating its two hundredth birthday. Everyone was there: both sets of grandparents, all five of my uncles (as of yet no aunts), distant cousins, family friends, and all the parishioners gladly claiming kinship with fellow Slovaks. Jaroslav Vajda preached.

My grandfather Hinlicky, a long-time pastor of Slovak-

American congregations on the east coast, baptized me. I was his first grandchild and born the day after his birthday. Years later on his deathbed he would bless me to take up the mantle of Christian ministry, to the surprise of us both. But the greater blessing was the baptism. “Sarah Ellen,” he said, scooping the water out of the shallow bowl set in the font, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” And the congregation said: “Amen.”

Then my young mother had the dubious honor of being the very last woman to undergo the churching of women rite at my grandfather’s hands. “I don’t think I’m going to do this anymore,” he said afterward. Maybe it was the look on her face.

When it was all over, I am told, there was an epic party. Because—

“It is of the greatest importance that we regard baptism as excellent, glorious, and exalted.”

1984

“The power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is that it saves. To be saved, as everyone well knows, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into Christ’s kingdom, and to live with him forever.”

St. Peter’s had brokered a deal with Citibank. The bank could build its fifty-nine-story Citicorp Center in midtown Manhattan over the site of the old Lutheran church, on the condition that it built the congregation a new church in the same spot, sealed off from the tower of Babel and its mammon ways. The resulting skyscraper had its supporting columns at the sides instead of the corners to accommodate the new church—a design so structurally unsound that the year after its construction it was secretly rewelded at

night over the course of three months. The general public didn't find out the danger it could have posed till nearly twenty years later.

The new church, however, was a rare case of beauty and elegance in a modern key. The ceiling soared, the vast white walls recalled the vault of heaven, right-angled blond wood pews on three sides and tangram organ pipes bespoke a conviction that the Holy Spirit would abundantly fill in the remaining space. Of greatest fascination to me was the baptismal font: a deep square stone pool, gently simmering and rippling across the surface. I'd seen grown men and women slide under the water at the Easter Vigil. I was excited to see my baby brother, not even a month old, undergo the same treatment.

It was the eighth of January, cold and slushy outside, the baptismal water barely warm within. Not quite the full complement of uncles was in attendance this time, nor the Slovak front, though one of Will's godparents counted among the tribe. John Damm, already an old pro at immersing babies, took my tiny brother and plunged him in three times, once for each Person of the holy Trinity. And each time he came forth Will bellowed with the full force of his infant lungs in rage and protest.

When it was all over, Damm quipped, "We sure drowned the old Adam out of that one!"

From that day on I've been convinced that Will's was the only fitting response to everything that baptism is: seizure from the clutches of death and the devil; drowning of the sinful self; being crucified with Christ; getting thrust into a new life without preparation or choice; enduring the radiance of God's mercy while still saddled with reluctantly converted flesh.

"These two parts, being dipped under the water and emerging from it, point to the power and effect of baptism, which is nothing else than the slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new creature, both of which must continue in us our whole life long."



1994

"Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after."

My year in Slovakia was drawing to a close. My family life as I had always known it was drawing to a close. I'd finished high school a year early to spend what would have been my senior year with my parents and brother on their adventure of moving to Slovakia, but in less than two months I'd be repatriating, and less than two months after that starting college. On an evening late in May we went to dinner to celebrate my eighteenth birthday: adulthood, or so government and culture told me. I did not want to leave, I had never approved of growing up, and I was unprepared for the next frontier.

Except that I was, whether I liked it or not, just as I got baptized whether I liked it or not. My parents gave me an assortment of presents, but the one that meant most and stuck with

me ever after was a scroll of printer paper, rolled up and tied with a ribbon, presented to me ceremonially. It was headed: "Submitted for APPROVAL TO THE COMMITTEE TO ENSURE A FAITHFUL, HONORABLE, AND INTERESTING LIFE FOR SARAH ELLEN HINLICKY." A number of "WHEREBY" clauses ensued, detailing the history of my life thus

God Himself stakes His honor on baptism.

far, which then gave way to a "THEREFORE": "THEREFORE, WE, having unexpectedly but gladly become parents of this young person eighteen years ago, do BESTOW and BEQUEATH EVERYTHING upon her which she will need in order to successfully conduct the balance of her years upon this Earth."

My goodly heritage followed. And first on the list:



The lifelong promise given to her in her BAPTISM on July 4, 1976. In the words of Martin Luther: *To appreciate and use Baptism aright, we must draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and we must retort: "But I am baptized! And if I am baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body."*

2006

"Baptism is a very different thing from all other water, not by virtue of the natural substance but because here something nobler is added, for God himself stakes his honor, his power, and his might on it. Therefore it is not simply a natural water, but a divine, heavenly, holy, and blessed water—praise it in any other terms you can—all by virtue of the Word, which is a heavenly, holy Word that no one can sufficiently extol, for it contains and conveys all that is God's."

The question was whether Andrew and I could have our son baptized in the river that ran behind one of the churches in my parents' two-point parish. My dad wasn't sure. "Pentecostals go down there all the time for baptisms," he told me, "but I'm not sure if a Lutheran's ever been baptized there before. Let's see how the congregation reacts first."

As it turned out, the local Lutherans—known in the rural corners of southwestern Virginia as "country Catholics"—were delighted at the prospect of not only a Lutheran but a baby getting saved in the New River. Each of the congregations threw us a baby shower (due as much to non-acceptance of their undesired yoking as to exuberance on our behalf), and when the day arrived they spontaneously organized lawn mowing to clear the path from church to river and van service for old folks who couldn't walk that far.

Everything but the final critical words took place in the sanctuary of the modest nineteenth-century brick walls and red doors and red carpet that made up the church: godparental vows (offered by my brother Will and, on Andrew's side, by our sister-in-law Katie), flood prayer, renunciation of the devil, and creed. Then the whole assembly decamped from the building and traversed the hundred or so yards to the riverbank. Most everyone stayed up top. My dad, officiating, and Andrew and I picked our way down the stony path to the water, tucked up our respective alb or trousers or dress, and waded in, with a characteristically relaxed and happy Ezekiel Zelaya in our arms.

It makes no never mind what kind

of water you do the business in. But something about relinquishing your child over flowing waters, waters headed downstream as fast as gravity will allow, waters that will drown as easily as they will irrigate, eliminates all sanitary and sanitizing notions of "bath" and "washing" from the mind and focuses maternal anxiety squarely on "we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death" (Romans 6:4).

Not that my dad could quite bring himself to put his first and only grandson all the way under; he lacked John Damm's long experience. Still, the boy went into the water, wet and cold and shocking to his eight-month-old flesh. He gasped and clenched up at each of his three semi-immersions. "—in the name of the Father," *gasp-clench*, "and of the Son," *gasp-clench*, "and of the Holy Spirit," *gasp-clench*. But no screaming this time. Some deaths go gently.

In this way, thirty years after I got baptized by my grandfather Hinlicky, whose birthday was the day before mine, my son got baptized by *his* grandfather Hinlicky, whose birthday was the day before his. We took it as a providential pattern to confirm the divinely arranged place of our adopted son in his new family.

Zeke's baptism came right in time. I needed him baptized, because I was floundering in the worst faith crisis of my life. I can't now reconstruct why, or what it was about, even; I remember only the long affliction and demoralizing fear that none of this was true. It didn't do me any good anymore to

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declare, "But I am baptized!" Because what if baptism was—nothing?

During this time Zeke was starting to talk. The first thing he learned to recognize and love was frogs. "Froggy!"

he'd shout. The second was Jesus. He could pick Jesus out anywhere, no matter how varied the artwork. A wooden sculpture of Jesus' face crowned with thorns—a stern Byzantine icon—a Reformation-era altarpiece—a sentimental painting—a children's Bible: he always knew it was Jesus, and he would always point, like a little John the Baptist, crying out, "Jeezy! Jeezy!" And he was always so *happy* to see "Jeezy."

In time, as mysteriously as the unbelief came over me it departed again, unable to resist Zeke's joyful infant faith. That's what healed me. Not books or thoughts or church services or my own flattened prayers. My small baptized son's witness restored me to my own baptism.

"Therefore baptism remains forever. Even though someone falls from it and sins, we always have access to it so that we may again subdue the old creature."

2017

"To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself. Although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own act."

By the time the long-anticipated anniversary year of the Reformation rolled around, I had been ordained more than a decade but had not yet baptized one single soul into the body of Christ.

I took comfort in St. Paul's remark, "Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 1:17), as if there were nothing self-evident about conjoining the two activities, Augsburg Confession notwithstanding. At least so I told myself whenever I felt I was living in an unconsummated ordination.

Circumstances had everything to do with it. My one spell of parish ministry lasted less than two years, the youngest members were forty years older than me, and neither babies nor converts were to be found in our midst. I spent the next eight years in a call to a research position in ecumenical theology: also not known for large



populations of babies and converts. Opportunities arose to preach, and more rarely still to preside at the Supper, both of which I seized, but nary a baptism. Christ did not send me to baptize but to ponder Christian disunity, which Paul could just as easily have written to his fissiparous congregation at Corinth.

Natalie, a pastor herself, knew of my plight, and long before she had the child, much less the husband, by which to validate her promise, she announced that I would be the one to baptize her firstborn into the kingdom of God. I was moved by the act of friendship but didn't give it much more thought. Providence evidently took the vow more seriously. The husband arrived in due course (informed on an early date of the baptismal stipulation, before the marriage discussion was even on the table; he took it well), and then the baby. And then the abundance of the Holy Spirit: Natalie asked me to be godmother as well as baptizer, and to baptize her nephew as well as her daughter. "Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion" (Isaiah 61:7).

This time it was at the magnificent First Lutheran in Pittsburgh, the only

Art Nouveau Lutheran church I've even seen. On the back wall gleams a Tiffany-glass Good Shepherd, and at the front is an elaborate mosaic of the Virgin and Child, whose pearly sheen matches the white marble altar below. And also matches, somewhat less fortuitously, the baptismal font: a life-size kneeling angel with drooping wings and a giant scallop shell balanced between white marble hands—theologically ambiguous at best.

The baptism took place on Epiphany, which fell on the eighth of January, the anniversary of my brother's baptism. In the course of the service I did three things I had never done

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before: I wore a cope; I genuflected; and I baptized. One of the congregational pastors led me and the other godparents through our vows. Then I switched sides and finally, finally, celebrated the other sacrament.

Thomas first: he was a toddler already, delighted at the proceedings,

splashing his hands in the angel's shell as I swept the water over his head and placed the name of the triune God on him. Then Maryam, my long-awaited goddaughter, who obliged her theologian godmother by screaming out all the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises as I laid the true and everlasting promises of God upon her.

I have spent a lot of years by now struggling with the Christian faith, with the disappointments of the church, with bad theology and con-

gregational sickness and division and disunity. At times I have wondered why I stick with it, why the Almighty sees fit to entrust His ministry of reconciliation to such egregiously unreconciled ambassadors, myself included. But when I baptized—when God baptized through my hands and voice—it was such pure, abject, radiant joy that I knew I was all in, forever and ever, thanks be to God, alleluia and amen.

“Baptism is far more glorious than anything else God has commanded and ordained;

in short, it is so full of comfort and grace that heaven and earth cannot comprehend it.”

LF

Quotations in italics are taken from Martin Luther's Large Catechism in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), except for the final quotation in the section “1994,” which comes from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959).