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Sermon Series: "Good News Bears"

### **"What is to keep me from being baptized?"**

On Tuesday the United States elected its 44<sup>th</sup> president. Whether one voted for Barack Obama or not, one can recognize that this is a significant moment in the history of this country. And it's significant all around the world, as it seems that the whole world was watching this election like it never has before. I was reading about a city in Japan that is named Obama, where they held a huge celebration. And I also read that recently there's been a proliferation of babies born in Kenya who are given the name Obama or Michelle.

For the first time, an African American is president of the most influential nation in the world. Republicans and Democrats and Independents can all celebrate that this is a monumental occasion that has powerful potential for healing. This is not the source of our healing; it is a sign of our healing. We as Christians believe that our God has created us all and loves us all, and God is the one who heals us and reconciles us. So we're grateful for moments like this that God uses to increase our respect, kindness, and love for each other across the boundaries that we create as sinful people. May God continue to do that reconciling work in this country and around the world.

Speaking of the world, today is Mission Sunday. After God raised Jesus from the dead and before he ascended into heaven, he gave them what is often called the Great Commission in Matthew 28. He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20).

"I am with you always," he said, just as he was about to leave. What's that about? How is Jesus with us on this mission that he has given us? He explains in Acts 1, just before he ascends into heaven. His disciples have seen the resurrection power of God that brought Jesus back to life, and they think, "It's gotta be the time now." So they ask him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" And Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:6-8).

Jesus' promise to be with us on this mission to the whole earth is not empty. He gave his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit. And that same Spirit who was present with them lives in us today, giving us power to carry out God's mission.

From that opening chapter in the book of Acts we have the church beginning in Jerusalem and spreading to the country of Samaria, and then expanding outward in all directions as the followers of Jesus share the good news. Our passage for today is one part of that story of the gospel spreading.

It's really amazing to think about the way in which God has been faithfully empowering the spreading of the good news of Jesus. The first followers of Jesus had no idea that the continent of North America even existed, and the only Philadelphia they knew was in modern-day Turkey. From so far away as Jerusalem, halfway around the world, the gospel has

reached even to here, even to us. If it can reach us, it can reach anybody – and that’s our mission from God.

In the Thursday night “Exploring Our Faith” class we’ve been having wonderful discussions about everything from the Trinity to sin and salvation. Recently we’ve been talking about the mission of the church. We’ve seen that according to Scripture we’ve got two parts of this mission that we need to keep together, that we’ve been calling “Word” and “Deed.” The “Word” aspect focuses on preaching the gospel, on telling people that there’s forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ. The “Deed” part reminds us that in our actions God calls us to care for those who are in need, to serve people, and to have the same kind of compassion that Christ had. So you could say that the “word” part is what we do with our mouth; the “deed” part of our mission is what we do with our hands and feet. And we need both together – that’s what it means to be the “Good News Bears” that this sermon series is talking about.

In this sermon I’m going to focus on one particular aspect of the mission that Christ gave us: baptism. Many in this sanctuary have been baptized. But I suspect there is a wide variety of ways and situations in which we have been baptized. Perhaps some of you were sprinkled with water while some of you were dunked, or completely immersed. Some of you have had water poured on your head. Some may have been baptized as babies, into the Catholic or Orthodox or a Mainline Protestant church. Others of you were baptized as adults, and others as pre-adults. Maybe some of you were re-baptized, just like the original Anabaptists of our faith.

Mennonites have always emphasized that following Jesus is a decision, a response to God’s gracious invitation. So we believe that baptism is not for infants but for adults, or at least pre-adults. In my case, it could hardly be described as an adult baptism. I was twelve years old. Now I know some twelve-year-olds and I remember somewhat what it was like to be twelve, and I like twelve-year-olds because they’re smart and energetic. But I wouldn’t say that a twelve-year-old is an adult, at least I know I wasn’t at twelve. At the same time, someone who’s baptized as a pre-teen or an adolescent can still know what it means to be sorry for their sins and to receive forgiveness from God and to decide to follow Jesus. And that’s really what it’s about.

So I said a prayer of faith in Christ and then I went through what my church in Lancaster called an “instruction class.” The purpose was to help me and others who were being baptized to understand what faith and being a disciple meant. The Christian church has been doing this for a long time, so that people know what they’re doing when they’re baptized and join the church.

And then after several months of the instruction class I was baptized on a Sunday morning along with two other people. We made a public confession of our faith in Christ and the pastor poured water on our heads as a sign that we were washed of our sin and we were going to join the other believers in following Jesus.

I remember that it was such a powerful experience for me that a couple of tears started rolling down my cheeks. You can probably guess how much a twelve-year-old boy likes to cry in front of other people – not very much. It’s right up there with being kissed by his mom. So I was kind of trying to hide it. And I’ll never forget that an older man came up to me and said, “It’s ok to cry – it’s the most important decision you’ll ever make in your life.” And it was, and it is. The decision to follow Jesus is more significant than what career you choose, where you live, even whom you marry.

Baptism is something Christians practice around the world, and something we practice here at Oxford Circle. I'd like to take a look at our covenant of members here at OCMC. The third statement says "We receive water baptism as believers as an outward sign of our repentance, of our commitment to follow Christ, and of our belonging to the Body of Christ, and the Church (Acts 2:38, 41)."

You can see that baptism is called a sign, something that you can see. Just like traffic signs, it is not the reality itself but it points to the reality. Let me give you an example. When you're driving and you see a sign that has an X on it, what does that mean? Railroad crossing—you're going to cross tracks. Is the sign the actual train track? No, the sign just points to the track.

That's what baptism is like – it's a sign that points to something that actually happens. And those three realities are right here. The first is our repentance; baptism is a sign that we're sorry for our sins and have turned away from them and received God's forgiveness. The second is our commitment to follow Christ. And third, baptism is a sign that we belong to the Body of Christ, the church. The Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." That's good news, worthy of proclamation.

"What is to keep me from being baptized?" That's the question asked by the court official in our passage in Acts 8. As I mentioned earlier, Acts is telling the story of how God's mission through the church is spreading from Jerusalem to Samaria and finally to the ends of the earth.

As one who was born in Africa, I'm pleased to point out that this official is one of many characters in the Bible who is African. He was from what is now Ethiopia or Sudan. And the text tells us that he was a court official of the Ethiopian queen, in charge of the whole treasury. This is a powerful, prestigious man. And he's fascinated by the Jewish faith – he'd come to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh and was on his way home. And he even had an expensive scroll and he was reading from Isaiah as he rode in his chariot.

That's when the Apostle Philip enters the scene. From the very beginning of the story, Philip is such a driven man that it seems that the main character is not him, but the Holy Spirit. He's so under the control of the Holy Spirit that he goes to Samaria and he's preaching and healing and casting out demons and a huge revival is going on. And then an angel comes to him and says, "Go out to the wilderness, to a road in the middle of nowhere." And he goes, I'm sure with no idea what will happen. When he comes across this official in the chariot, again he's prompted by the Holy Spirit, who says, "Go up and join the chariot." So he does.

When Philip gets near he can hear that the man is reading from Isaiah and he asks him, "Do you understand what you're reading?" Apparently the question sounded like an offer, because the official responded, "How can I if no one explains it to me?" and then invites Philip into the chariot. I guess he assumed that Philip had some answers.

And Philip certainly does. The passage they were reading is in Isaiah 53:7-8: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." The eunuch asks Philip, "Who is this talking about, is it about Isaiah or is it someone else?"

And Philip starts with this passage and explains to him all about the good news of Jesus. We're not told everything they talked about, but apparently they had gotten to the

subject of baptism, because as they were going along they saw some water along the road, maybe a river or a pool. And the official says, “Look, there’s some water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

So they stop the chariot and go down into the water and Philip baptizes him. And then when they come up out of the water, suddenly Philip is gone, and the text tells us that the Spirit of the Lord snatched him away. The official didn’t see him anymore, but he continued on rejoicing. Philip goes on his way led by the Spirit and continues to preach the good news in every town he comes across.

Tradition has it that the Ethiopian church has its origins in this powerful man who found Christ through Philip and returned to his home country as a missionary. Whether that’s true or not, the fact is that the gospel spreads exactly through encounters like this. The Holy Spirit is using the church to carry out God’s mission to Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

It’s a powerful question: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” And the answer is even more powerful: Nothing. Nothing is to prevent you from close fellowship with God. The same invitation for the whole world is open to us.

For those who have not been baptized, this Scripture causes us to ask, “What is keeping me from it?” What is keeping me from repenting of my sin, turning from it and receiving God’s forgiveness in Christ? What is keeping me from making a commitment to follow Christ as Lord of my life? What is keeping me from joining other believers in following Jesus?

Maybe you are already following Jesus and you’re involved in church, but you haven’t been baptized as a believer. If this is where you are, I invite you to come and talk to me or to Pastor Lynn. Even if you’re not sure about your baptism or if you don’t know if you want to be, talk to us anyway.

For those who have been baptized as believers, keep coming back to that commitment. Let it serve for you as a rock, a foundation, a sign of what God has done for you. Keep asking the question, “What is preventing me from living in the fullness of my baptismal vows?” Is there anything keeping me stuck in sin, keeping me from repentance and forgiveness? What is taking my love and attention more than my commitment to Christ? What’s keeping me from fellowship with my sisters and brothers in Christ?

Paul writes in 1 Cor. 12, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:12-13).

Philip shared with the Ethiopian court official the good news of Jesus. Let me remind you again just how good that news is. Jesus Christ came in the flesh as God and human to save us from our sin. He has restored our fellowship with God and broken down divisions between us. God has forgiven our sins and we can be free of guilt. We can live lives of purpose and meaning as we join with each other in God’s mission in the world. We’re filled with the Holy Spirit and given power to live holy lives of faith. And even though we face death, in Christ we will be resurrected into eternal life.

After the exciting events of Tuesday night’s election, I lay in bed at about one o’clock thinking about all that I’d just seen and heard in the whirlwind media coverage. My mind was going and I found myself thinking, “How must Barack Obama feel right now?” He’s just been elected to the most important political office in the world. Beyond that, he’s broken a barrier that some said would not be broken for generations. His name will go down in the history

alongside Rosa Parks, Jackie Robinson, and Martin Luther King, Jr. It must be an overwhelming, surreal experience for him.

But as I was falling asleep, I realized that I and many, many sisters and brothers in Christ know an experience that's even better than that. Our names may not go down in the history books, but we'll outlive the history books. We've been given an identity and an inheritance that will never fade away: child of the Most High God. We've been given a purpose and a mission that is more important than any political office: servant and ambassador of the most Creator of the Universe.

Let's not forget just how amazing this good news is. And we need to share it, in Word and Deed, with our mouths and our hands and our feet. There are lots of chances to do this right here. You can help with the Frankford Soup Kitchen. You can be involved with the growing after-school program. You can give to the church, give for missions, or give to the caring fund that helps people in need. Our friend Jeff reminded me the other day that one way we can begin to share the good news is just to invite people to church. Here they can hear the Word, and experience the worship of our God and the fellowship of believers. We don't want to grow just for the sake of growing; we want to grow because this news is too good to keep to ourselves.

Before I close I'd like to talk about one more aspect of baptism. We've talked about baptism by water, which is a sign of repentance, commitment to follow Christ, and joining the church. But there's another aspect of baptism in Scripture and in Christian tradition. The baptism of blood, or baptism of suffering, is when one offers one's life, even to the point of death. Jesus understood the giving of his life through the shedding of his blood for others as a baptism (Luke 12:50; 1 John 5:7-8). And he also spoke about his disciples' suffering and death as a baptism (Mark 10:38).

Those who accept water baptism commit themselves to follow Jesus. We commit to give our lives for others, to love our enemies, and to renounce violence, even when it means our own suffering or death. That's the baptism by water and blood that the first Christians experienced. The first Anabaptists too, five hundred years ago, often suffered and were killed for this baptism. In the final session of our Thursday night class, on December 4, we're going to watch a film called "The Radicals." It's about the early Anabaptists' witness that following Jesus has to be a radical change that influences every part of your life. It's a true story. The main characters, Michael and Margaretha Sattler, were eventually killed for their baptism and what it represented. So I want to invite you to come watch it with us here at the church. If you've never seen it, it's well worth it, and even if you have, come watch it again. I think you'll be struck with the raw power of lives that are given completely to Jesus.

"What is to prevent me?" "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" "What is keeping me from living the fullness of my baptism?" Nothing is to prevent you from close fellowship with God. The baptism of water and blood, the chance to repent, commit to following Jesus, and join the church has never been clearer.

I'd like to close with these words from Paul again: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:12-13). "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27-28).

*Prayer:* Lord, we are in awe of your goodness. We thank you for all the gifts that you give us, but most of all we thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, and may we walk in your truth. Lead us to repent of our sin and receive your gracious forgiveness. Give us the power to follow Jesus in every area of our lives. And we pray for fellowship with one another in the church that strengthens us in spreading your good news.