

## **Believer's Baptism (Chap 2, Searching for Sunday) – Psalm 29, Matthew 3:13-17**

As we begin this year, in our preaching and in some of our small groups we are going to be dipping in and out of this book - Rachel Held Evan's *Searching for Sunday*.

Rachel Held Evans was the author of *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* (or) *How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband Master*, about spending an entire year living the Bible literally, which became a New York Times bestseller, as did this book, *Searching for Sunday*. Tragically, after founding the Evolving Faith network with Sarah Bessey (whose book *Field Notes for the Wilderness* we looked at last year), Rachel Held Evans died very unexpectedly from an allergic reaction to a medication in May 2019.

*Searching for Sunday* was her confession that despite the hurt and the harm that the church had done, she was drawn back to it by her search for resurrection, her searching for Sunday.

In the book she explores Christianity through seven themes; *baptism, confession, holy orders, communion, confirmation, anointing of the sick and marriage*. You might recognise these as the Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox sacraments, but as someone coming from the Baptist tradition and someone exploring an evolving faith, Evans deals with these themes in ways I think we will find helpful. These themes (and I like this parallelism) also trace our journey through the start of the church year, from Jesus' baptism, to Lent, to Easter and to the birth of the church at Pentecost.

Evans writes: *"It seemed fitting to arrange the book around the sacraments because it was the sacraments that drew me back to church.... When my faith had become little more than an abstraction, a set of propositions to be affirmed or denied, the tangible, tactile nature of the sacraments invited me to touch, smell, taste, hear and see God in the stuff of everyday life again. They got God out of my head and into my hands. They reminded me that Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken and enacted in the presence of other people. They reminded me that, try as I may, I can't be a Christian on my own. I need a community. I need the church."*

So, for the next few months we will be exploring these themes, taking two Sundays on each, and today we begin with *Believer's Baptism*. (If you are following along in the book, this is chapter 2 of *Searching for Sunday*.)

Last weekend we were visited by members of the *Community of the Transfiguration* who showed us, on Saturday, pictures of their *oratory* (a

fancy monk word for worship space) which has, just inside the doorway of the church, a baptistry. You can step down into it and step back out of it to go further into the worship space. You can also walk around it, but it is there, immediately and centrally as you come to worship, to remind you that the symbol of the beginning of Christian life is baptism.

Having a baptistry in the church entrance is an old architectural idea. In the early centuries of the church, baptism was for adult believers and was performed by full immersion or something called *affusion* (pouring water over candidates standing in water). At first, this was done outdoors or in people's homes, but when churches began to be built, baptisteries were placed in the porch or just inside the church. As Evans writes, *"This is why the baptism font is typically located near the entrance.... The central aisle represents the Christian's journey through life toward God, a journey that begins with baptism."*

Baptists are not famous for our architecture (our buildings are usually simpler, deliberately so, intended to not distract the worshipper) and at the front of Baptist churches there is always an architectural tussle taking place! How do we place centrally all three symbols of our faith: the baptistry representing this journey through life toward God, the communion table representing communion with Christ and with each other, and the pulpit representing the mission of the church, the preaching of the word? At one time, this church, I believe, did have all three items centrally located, but over time, for pragmatic reasons, compromises have been made.

But the baptistry does deserve to be front and centre for Baptists. It is in our name. It is how we got our name! In 1609, John Smyth, a Puritan minister, and Thomas Helwys, a barrister and reformer, became convinced that a church that followed scripture could only consist of regenerate (or living) believers, believers who indicated their commitment to following Christ by baptism by immersion. A conviction which cost many early Baptist believers dearly. Evans writes, *"Had we lived in sixteenth century Switzerland, we might have been killed for such a conviction, symbolically drowned or burned by fellow Protestants who considers the 'second baptisms' [because all these people had been baptised as infants] of the radical reformers heretical."*

My own baptism took place when I was fourteen years old. I had grown up among American and Australian missionaries, most of were Baptist or from very similar evangelical traditions. Some of whom believed, as Evans mentions in this chapter, that salvation and baptism were indistinguishable – that you had to get baptised in order to be saved - and that there was an 'age of accountability' for children – before which you got into heaven based on your parent's faithfulness and after which you were on your own! Not doctrines that we would preach or teach as a church!

Although I had 'accepted Jesus as my Saviour' formally at age eight, and informally, I think, much earlier than that, I felt that baptism was a step I should take when I was more certain of the direction of my life. (It is cute that I thought I had that worked out at age 14!)

There was also, something of an undertow of baptism taking place in the youth group at Frenchs Forest Baptist Church at the time, and so I found myself receiving the typed-up instructions, from Mrs Marchant, for 'ladies' receiving baptism (much more detailed than the instructions given to men):

*Ladies, please bring:*

*a plastic bag for wet things*

*a complete set of underwear*

*2 large towels*

*A bathmat or something on which to stand*

*Talcum powder – to help you dry quickly*

*A hair dryer, rubber bands or hair pins...*

*(Extra suggestions... for your comfort and the overall atmosphere of worship during the service. Please wear a full-slip (not half-slip) under your baptismal frock.... [and] if you have asked a special friend to assist you, it would be appreciated if they could wear something light coloured to merge with the background.)*

Evans speaks about having to unpack modesty culture. There was always the sense men were the proper disciples. Women required extra qualification... It's not just Talcum powder that is out of favour since that was written!

But eventually, in my full-slip and frock, with weights attached to the hem, I found myself in front of the church saying these words:



*It wasn't until last year in June when I came from Irian Jaya, Indonesia, and went to an Australian public high school that I really needed to get close to God. I want to be baptised now in obedience to Jesus' own example and my testimony to you is: Psalm 27:1, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; I will fear no one... "Tonight I believe he will be my light for the future, was my light in the past and now I will fear no one.*

I really appreciated what Jane Carmody said, two weeks ago when we welcomed her into membership, about that same verse, and about the fact that even after the before, how and after stages of a Baptist testimony – even after that, we continue to sin, to doubt, to be afraid, to experience emptiness and searching as we continue to be transformed by God's light and love.

Evans says she wondered, after her baptism, why she *“didn’t feel cleaner, why [she] didn’t feel holier or lighter or closer to God.”* And she relates a story about Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, who when he was in dark place *“(which happened a lot, [Evans comments], the dude was totally bipolar),...would comfort himself by saying, “Martin, be calm, you are baptised.”* Not because he was *“recalling the moment of baptism itself, or relying on baptism as a sort of magic charm”,* but because he was remembering what baptism signified: that he was a beloved child of God.

Ultimately this is what baptism signifies for all of us. When Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan, *“a voice from the heavens said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”* *“Jesus,”* Evans writes, *“did not begin to be loved at the moment of his baptism, nor did he cease to be loved when his baptism became a memory. Baptism simply named the reality of his existing and unending belovedness.”*

And baptism does that for us as well. It signifies the underlying and unending reality that we are beloved children of God.

And we too are baptised *“into the sprawling, beautiful, [sometimes] dysfunctional family of the church by whoever happens to be standing on the shoreline”* or, in my case, on the baptistry steps with Talcum powder, a large towel and wearing light-coloured clothing!

Evans confesses, *“At times I’ve tried to wring the waters of my first baptism out of my clothes, shake them out of my hair, and ask for a do-over in some other community where they ordain women, vote for Democrats, and believe in evolution. But Jesus has this odd habit of allowing ordinary, screwed up people to introduce him, and so it was ordinary, screwed up people who first told me that I was a beloved child of God, who first called me a Christian....”*

And the same is true for me – and probably for all of us – we have been introduced to God by ordinary, screwed up people, and we have been taught and encouraged and prayed for and pastored by ordinary, screwed up people.

As Evans concludes, *“I was baptised by water and by spirit and by this strange bundle of atoms and genes and experiences God has assembled, delighted in, and in an act of absurd mercy named Beloved.”*

As we sing this next song – *I am a child of God, I am a glimpse of God’s new creation* – I would invite you if you would like to come and put your hand in this representation of a baptistry and as you walk along the church aisle to think about your journey through life to God, and as you look around the church to give thanks for all those who have told you that you are God’s beloved child.