

Christian faith is a story of good news. It's always been that way. It's the good news that God has personally drawn near to creation (Christmas) and that God has personally transformed the brokenness of creation (Easter). It's a story — and announcement — of good news. The trick is that we live in a world with lots of bad news. It's always been that way. So one of the opportunities & responsibilities for Christians, from the beginning, has been to show how our good news is real & believable in a world of bad news; a world of violence, a world of cheating, a world of death.

It's a responsibility & opportunity that can feel even more urgent on a day like today, when we welcome another child into the household of faith. It can also feel more urgent because we're at the start of a new year. Now is the time to focus on new opportunities. Earlier this week I was telling someone about my plans for the year. And, I told him, it's still early enough in the year so they ALL seem possible. It doesn't matter that I'm going to be a new dad in a few weeks. It's a new year! Everything feels possible! Because new years draw our hearts & minds to new possibilities and new resolutions.

This week I got the following message from one of our church publishing houses: *Whether you wish to tune-up your physical and spiritual well-being, slow climate change, enhance financial wellness, renew your relationship with God, serve like Jesus, or nurture a healthy congregation . . . we have a resource for you.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.churchpublishing.org/newyear>

New year's resolutions are one way to focus on good news. They work by compartmentalizing; narrowing our focus to a few things we control. Because even if we live in a world that's full of bad news, we can resolve to improve at least a few things in our control. It can be something simple like losing a few pounds, or something big like our faith. We reduce "good news" to something small that we control; or something that doesn't really matter very much.

But even then, it usually doesn't take long for our bubble to burst. This week the day after I told someone that I felt like everything was possible I also came across the following headline in a popular science magazine. The headline was: **WHY YOUR BRAIN MAKES NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS IMPOSSIBLE TO KEEP.**<sup>2</sup> According to the article, when it comes to our brains, New Year's resolutions are like living on bad credit with ourselves. "It's like going to buy furniture and not having to pay anything [for 2 yrs].... When you make a New Year's resolution, you feel good about it at that moment, so you predict that you are going to feel good about it in the future. But when you actually go to do that resolution, the action itself doesn't make you feel good (or at least not as good as sitting on the couch makes you feel). So you put it off." And before we even reach the end of January our resolutions have already become another piece of bad news; just another reminder that good news is even less reliable.

Our faith can feel the same way. We can make the best intentions to be good

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.popsoci.com/how-to-use-brain-science-to-stick-to-your-new-years-resolutions>

people, good Christians, until we have a rotten conversation at coffee hour or someone cuts us off in the parking lot at church. Before long even church can become another reminder about the bad news instead of good news. So maybe we compartmentalize our faith. Maybe we reduce our “good news” to the size where there’s not very much at stake. One of the most common ways of compartmentalizing our faith is by sentimentalizing it. Turning it into a Hallmark card or a cliché. Maybe our “good news” is just that God feels good about us — even if the world and our lives are a total mess.

In a sense, you bet, that's true. One of our basic Christian claims is that **God is love**. God is not guilt. God is not a dictator. God isn't a really big projection of our fear. You may have noticed during the Christmas season, when angels keep popping up on God's behalf the first thing they often say is, "Do not fear." Because God is love. So you bet, in a sense our good news means that God loves us in the midst of any turmoil or helplessness.

It's the good news we hear in the last verse of today's gospel. Because in Christian baptism we believe that God looks at each of us and proclaims the same words spoken over Jesus. We believe God will look on Whitney and proclaim: “This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased,” (Matt. 3.17). It's one of the beautiful things about baptizing infants. Baptizing an infant is one of the best ways we know to express God's love regardless of anyone's age or ability, regardless of intelligence or appearance or any other characteristic.

One of the best ways we know to enact God's love is by welcoming an infant into the family of people who are never too helpless, or hopeless, or powerless in God's sight. That's good news. But it doesn't end there. It doesn't end with God's embrace. It's just the beginning. The good news of Christian life begins with God's embrace in baptism -- and it grows from there.

You see, maybe the real difference between Christian good news and the kind of good news that compels us to keep making new resolutions at the start of each year is that Christian good news never depends on our own strength. We could put it like this: ***Baptism isn't about our resolution to do better for God. It's about God's resolution to do better with us.***

Of course, we express all kinds of resolutions in our baptismal covenant. As you're about to hear, baptismal sponsors & candidates resolve to renounce evil and turn to Christ. Our will & our resolve are deeply involved in Christian baptism. But it doesn't depend on our will. It depends on our willingness to let God change us.

One of the church's earliest and greatest theologians, St. Augustine, put it like this. He said, **“My soul is like a house, small for you to enter, but I pray you to enlarge it.”**<sup>3</sup> In his most famous book, *The Confessions*, he begins by confessing his sins and he ends by confessing his faith. Augustine's brilliance was not reducing good news to something that's simply about our control; not reducing it to a size that make us think our lives are about us. Augustine thought that was a

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, I.v.

kind of spiritual childhood. He says we can spend our whole lives in a kind of spiritual childhood even if “grown-up games are known as ‘business’.”<sup>4</sup> With a kind of mock horror, he wonders, “Why do we continually hear people say, even nowadays (in the 4th ce.), ‘Leave him alone and let him do [whatever he wants]. [After all] He is not yet baptized’? Yet when the health of the body is at stake, no one says ‘Let him get worse. He is not yet cured’,” (I.xi).

For Augustine, and for Christians ever since, one of the primary cures for our souls is the good news of Christian baptism. We may have different language for the illness that plagues our souls but "even nowadays" (in the 21st ce.) we still recognize the symptoms. We still recognize how easy it is to sabotage & frustrate our best intentions; especially this time of year when our "BRAIN MAKES NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS IMPOSSIBLE TO KEEP". We still recognize the same symptoms. If baptism is good news, then let's do this. Let's close by looking at three ways the Baptism of Jesus points us toward the good news of a divine cure for the human soul.

First, baptism begins by **joining** us to a community. It's one of the easiest things to overlook in the story of Jesus' baptism, but maybe one of the most significant. Christian good news for the human soul isn't about escaping community. It's about joining community. Yes, Jesus spends 40 days and 40 nights in the desert after his baptism. But the wilderness isn't where he learns his identity.

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, I.ix.

It's the where the truth of God's community is proved. God declares Jesus' identity in the midst of God's community. And that identity gets tested in the wilderness. Community comes first — both for Jesus, and for us. The first step in curing the human soul isn't about isolating ourselves from the community of God's people. It's about joining them.

Second, baptism invites us to **submit** to the community of God's people. And that word is intentional: submit. Because we live in a world where submission sounds like a loss. It sounds like having less of ourselves, not more ourselves. It sounds like bad news, not good news. Baptism into the community of God's people turns that perspective on its head. Because submission is only a loss if our lives are defined by autonomy or self-will.

We Christians have a different view. Because the God of our faith is the One who meets us in humility & love. As one of the Church's first elders wrote to an early Christian community: *We love because God first loved us.... the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't [possibly] love God, who can't be seen*, (1Jn. 4:19-20). Our submission to be shaped, influenced, supported, even challenged by the community of God's people is one of the primary ways we reflect God's image if our God is really defined by love. As we hear from a contemporary theologian, "Christian baptism is an acceptance of death, the death of all the things that create a world that is separate from God"<sup>5</sup> and our neighbor.

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<sup>5</sup> Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections: Year A* (London: SPCK, 2004), 23.

Baptism invites us to find our identity by *joining* the community of God's people. Baptism invites us to reflect God's image by *submitting* to the loving community of God's people. And finally, baptism invites us to become God's agents in the world by **receiving** God's Spirit. Join. Submit. Receive. Receiving God's Spirit allows us to become God's agents and God's people in the world.

In Isaiah, the Spirit of God is what allows the servant to "bring justice to the nations," (Isa. 42.1). He will faithfully bring justice (42.3). He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice (42.4). In Acts, we learn that the Spirit of Jesus received in our baptism also makes us caretakers of creation & witnesses to God (Acts 10.42). That's where baptism ultimately leads. It leads us to become God's caretakers and witness in creation.

The good news of Christian baptism begins when we're named as God's children & embraced by God's love. But that's not the end. It's just the beginning. Christian good news is about **joining** the community of God's people in faith, and **submitting** to God's community in love. It's about **receiving** God's spirit and announcing God's hope to the world. No one is ever too helpless, too hopeless, or too small to begin that journey. Because Christian good news is never about our resolve to do better for God. It's about God's resolve to do better with us. So as we gather with Whitney and her family today, let's join the long line of Christians in joy & humility. From the youngest to the oldest, as we gather let's pray: *Our soul is like a house, small for you to enter, but we pray you to enlarge it. Amen.*