

Down by the Riverside
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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This supposedly happened at a small church in Georgia. A husband and wife were being baptized. I don't know if you've ever seen a baptistery like this, but I have. It was built into the floor of the chancel, rather than up high like ours. To access the baptistery, the deacons had to move the pulpit, which was in the center, and lift boards that covered the baptistery. It seems like a poor design to me, but it was fairly common in rural churches. This church didn't have changing rooms, like we have. So they hung sheets over wires on either side of the baptistery. I'm assuming they didn't have a choir sitting behind the sheets.

The husband went first, and everything went well. He climbed out of the water and went behind the sheet to change clothes. The word "behind" is the operative word here.

His wife went next. According to the story, she was a rather large person. When she reached the last step going down into the water, it broke, sending her plunging into the water. She instinctively reached out to take hold of something. She found something. It was the sheet that was giving her husband a bit of privacy from the congregation. As she continued to fall into the water, so did the sheet, exposing her husband's backside to the whole congregation. The shocked husband stood there for a moment trying to decide what to do. He decided to dive into the water. So he turned, exposing everything now, and dove into the baptistery.

They reportedly had to sing several hymns to bring order back to the congregation.

Many of you have stories about your baptisms too. I've shared some in the past. Some are funny; others are deeply meaningful and moving. Our forefathers and mothers, the earliest Baptists, took a

radical position concerning baptism. They rejected infant baptism, which was the practice of the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Lutherans, Methodist, and most other Protestants. The Baptists and a handful of others rejected infant baptism, choosing instead to withhold baptism until candidates were old enough to choose it for themselves.

“Child abuse!” some outside the Baptist fold charged. “That’s pure child abuse. What if your child dies before he is baptized? Why, his soul will be gathered with Satan and all the demons of hell.”

I know that sounds harsh to us today, but that was the prevailing view at the time. Infant mortality was high. If an unbaptized child died, that child’s soul went to hell, many believed.

Nevertheless, Baptists held tightly to their convictions. They would save all the candidates for baptism until the weather warmed in the spring. Then they would go down to the river to baptize. They dunked them three times: in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Their critics stood on the riverside and laughed. They called them the dunkers. The name that finally stuck, of course, is the Baptists.

On this day each year, we remember the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. John admitted that he was not worthy to untie Jesus’ sandal, but he was the one chosen to baptize our Lord. Luke records that after Jesus was baptized, the heavens above opened. The Holy Spirit descended upon the people in the form of a dove, and a voice came from the heavens, saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

On this day each year, we also remember our own baptisms. Whether it was literally down by the riverside or in a baptistery like ours, let us take a moment to remember our baptisms. The vows we made. The feeling of the water washing over us. The spiritual high. The deep sense of gratitude. Let us remember again our own baptisms and be renewed and thankful.

Ashley Olmsted was baptized in May of 2017. She is a student now at the University of North Alabama. She has just resumed classes but agreed to come home this weekend to dialogue with me about her baptism. Ashley, would you join me here please.

I hope we're not taking you away from some important studies this weekend. You chose to delay your baptism. Would you explain to everyone why you waited to be baptized?

What are the benefits of waiting?

What does baptism mean for you?

Some people are apprehensive about being baptized. They don't know where to go or what to do. They're uncertain about the water. Would you explain how your baptism unfolded?

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Would you join me in thanking Ashley for coming home this weekend to share with us about her baptism?

Down by the Riverside is the title of a Negro spiritual about baptism. It talks about the changes that occur at baptism—down by the riverside. Gonna lay down my sword and shield...down by the riverside. Ain't gonna study war no more. Gonna put on my long white robe. Gonna put on my starry crown. Gonna put on my golden shoes. Gonna shake hands around the world...down by the riverside.

Perhaps you've been considering baptism, and you're ready to make that decision. No pressure. Simply an invitation. To go down by the riverside.

Closing Prayer

Lord, many of us have felt that wash of water. We have heard those words: in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We thank you for our call to faith and our baptisms. Help us to honor the vows we made. Amen.