

Reese and Ralph: Marked for Jesus

A sermon on Ephesians 1:3-14 for the baptism of Reese Catherine Bruckner
June 15, 2008 • New Wilmington Presbyterian Church • Rev. Ralph W. Hawkins

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

*In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, **[you] were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;** this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.*

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June 15, 2008
New Wilmington Presbyterian Church

Dear Reese,

Grace and peace to you today in the name of Jesus Christ.

I trust this finds you well this morning, surrounded as you are by family and friends. Whether you know it or not, Reese, this is a big day in your life ... although, I do appreciate the fact that at six months of age, *every day* is a big day in your life. You have begun that magnificent, yet easily forgotten season of life when everything and everyone is full of fresh new meaning and significance. Indeed, we hope this day brings more of the same.

Today we are going to baptize you. This a huge thing, Reese, more than I can explain in a single correspondence like this. If yours is an experience like many

of those gathered here with you this morning, including me, you'll likely spend the rest of your life unpacking what this day means and marks.

It all starts with water, as you'll soon discover. (I apologize in advance for getting you wet today.) You know, *water*: the stuff of bath time and feeding time alike – good for splashing and sudsing and basically getting everyone and everything around you soaking wet. This is surely one of life's best little pleasures.

Baptism is nothing without water, Reese. And yet it is so much more: This is a *holy* bath, a sign pointing beyond yourself and your circumstances *to God*. It is a cleansing of your life; a seal on your body, for your soul. It is pretending – make believe! – that you are going down under this water, only then to come up again safely on the other side. It is the beginning of a journey, a welcoming into a certain people; it is a marker that you belong.

These last two are what I write about to you today: these people, this marker.

It is my distinct privilege, Reese, to welcome you today to the New Wilmington Presbyterian Church – your new household of faith. It is one of several to come, I'm sure. I offer you a hearty welcome to this place and these people and their purpose, even though I confess that I am pretty new around these parts myself. I only have you by, let's see, *two weeks*?

So perhaps we can be “new” together. Maybe we can look out for each other in the coming months and years. There is much for us to learn, much to see and do, much to discover. For instance, pretty soon you'll be on the hunt for the snack cabinet and other essential locations in this place. Soon enough you'll be digging in the toy chest for that favorite set of well-worn blocks. Before long you'll be hoping to hear again your favorite story from a Children's Bible on some shelf somewhere. (You'll like those, Reese, they have pictures. They are much more helpful during a long sermon than these in the pews – *no pictures*.)

As for me, I'll be trying to get the lay of this land myself over the next few months. I'm on a hunt for where they keep the copy paper and the extra pens (the real ones, too ... not those ball points). I'll be opening doors and sitting in meetings and visiting in living rooms and listening and learning. And, oh yes, I'll also be trying to figure out how to use these phones. (Reese, you've never seen so many buttons in your life! You'd love it. Flashy lights, too.)

So let's be new together, shall we? New to this fine place and its people – *God's people*. These folk who have welcomed me, and who today welcome you, as well.

Get to know these people, Reese, because without them, and others like them in other congregations, this water we bathe you with this morning would not make any sense at all. You'll soon discover – if you haven't already – that *bath time* is no fun without someone to splash and soak. And I hope in time you'll also discover that *baptism* is no fun without God's people around to witness and promise.

You already belong to your parents, and this is an enormous gift in your life. But after we pour a little water on you today, you'll also belong to us – New Wilmington Presbyterian Church. You already have a wonderful home to grow up in, I know. But after today, you'll also have a household *of faith* in which, as the Bible puts it, you'll "grow up into Christ Jesus" – the "full measure" of what God hopes for us (Ephesians 4:13). In your home, you are fed and clothed and sheltered and loved. No less so, here, Reese: We hope to feed you and clothe you and shelter you with *God's* abiding love.

Yet it's a funny thing about homes, families, and churches; parents, pastors, and people: Even though you belong to us, it is not finally *about us*. Our work in your life is to one day teach you how, not to depend upon us any more, but to depend upon the Lord alone – who has made you, and calls you, and will sustain you. You belong to us mostly so that we can teach you how to belong to the Lord. Or better yet: to teach you that you already do.

Your parents, I'm certain, will raise you in such a way that you will learn to grow up, to walk on your own, to live your life as the capable, caring, compassionate woman we imagine you will be. This is important to understand, Reese, because the same thing will hopefully happen here at church: We want you to belong here, we do. But the most important thing we can do for you in the next dozen or more years is to help you understand that *you belong to Jesus*, and through him, to the living God who creates and calls and cares. This is what we hope to be about in your life.

Which brings me to the second thing I want to tell you about today: *markers*. As we baptize you this morning, Reese, we are *marking you* as God's own. The water we will pour on your little head is, among many things, a marker that now you belong to Jesus.

This is huge, and difficult to explain fully – even for me, who spends his days trying to say clearly and often what this water means for all of us. Still, I'll do the best I can.

Let's try to say it this way: Pretty soon you'll discover the joy of marking things, Reese. You'll love this, even though your mother may not always be so enthusiastic. You'll mark up paper, you'll mark up coloring books, you'll mark on your father's freshly painted walls. (OK, so I don't recommend the last one.) But you'll make your impression, you'll leave your mark, you'll leave a sign that "Reese was here," in all her glory!

That's what baptism is like: a marker that *God* was here, in all God's glory ... here with us, and with you, today. This water is a marker that God will be with you *throughout* your days.

Or try this one: If you are like me, one of the things you'll come to really enjoy is owning things, having items that are your own and belong to no one else. One day, before too long (too soon for your parents, I'm sure), you'll head off to

preschool. And one of the things you'll need is a backpack or something similar for all your things. (I'd highly recommend *Hello Kitty*. It's very trendy among the preschooler set these days.) You'll load this little bag up with everything you need for the day: colors, paper, and a snack (or perhaps *several* snacks).

But here's the problem, Reese: You'll soon discover that everyone else has a backpack of some sort, too! So how will you know which is whose, what one belongs to you? What if there are others that seem to look just like yours? How will your classmates know not to grab your bag and take it home with them at the end of the day?

Well, because you'll mark it, of course.

THIS SCHOOL BAG BELONGS TO REESE.

That's what we are doing here today, little friend. We are marking you.

THIS CHILD BELONGS TO GOD.

THIS LIFE PROPERTY OF JESUS.

This changes everything, Reese. You will never have to worry about who you are precisely because of *whose* you are. You'll go through life noticing all these people around you who seem adrift, lost, fluttering about like those brown leaves that will blow through your yard this fall. But not you, Reese. You belong! Yes, to your parents ... and this is a great gift. Yes, to this church (and likely others, in others seasons of your life) ... and we are honored to have you.

But most importantly, Reese – what really matters – is that you belong to God.

I can't fully explain to you how all of this works; I can't put it all into words that you can understand. (Most days I'm not even sure I can put it into words that *I* can fully understand.) But here's what I have been taught, and what I am coming to know myself:

I have been told that as we pour water on you, God has promised to pour out God's very self on you, what the Bible calls the "Holy Spirit."

I have been taught that, on the one hand, we'll be looking for you to claim your faith as your own when you are old enough to do so. But on the other hand, your faith in God, your belonging to God, has nothing to do with you. It stretches back well before you, Reese, even well before time. I've been told that somehow in God's life and heart you were known and loved even before you existed at all, even before any of us or any of this existed. Astonishing.

I have learned to imagine that by marking you with water today, your story (now only six or so months along) is somehow connected to God's story. Your story is now connected to this Jesus we talk about so much – who lived, and died, and was raised up again. Your story, just beginning, is now interwoven into his story, well underway and soon to finish. Somehow at only six months old, Reese, your story is 2,000 years old, to say the least.

And I know also that there is no place you can go, no act you can do or fail to do, no matter or mandate under heaven that can undo this claim upon you. This fact will trouble you when you are in the wrong; it will guide you when you are lost; it will surely bless you when you are in need.

(I could go on like this for some time, but that's probably plenty for now. We should get to the water soon before too long!)

Just trust me when I say that this mark changes everything.

It has for me. Like you, early in my life a bunch of total strangers held me precariously over a bowl and sprinkled cold water on my head. I didn't appreciate it very much at the time. (They could have at least warmed up the water).

But now I look back and realize that those strangers turned out to be my friends, my older siblings in Christ. And those same people were the first to tell me that I belonged to God. They had poured the water, and then later they told me – again and again – that God had poured out his Spirit upon me.

And this has changed everything for me, Reese. On the great and good days, I know whom to thank. On the plain old ordinary days, I know whom to look to for inspiration and guidance and the purpose of my life. On the lonely and discouraging and darker days, I know that I am not alone, and that the terrible circumstances of my life or the lives of those connected to me do not have the final word.

I belong to Jesus Christ, Reese, and this has made all the difference. And now, you do too! Reese and Ralph, marked for Jesus. And all these fine folks with us.

**THIS CHILD BELONGS TO GOD.
THIS LIFE PROPERTY OF JESUS.**

I earnestly pray that this will come to make all the difference in your life.

Godspeed to you, Reese, as you set out with us along this Jesus way.

Wherever you go, whatever the season, whomever draws near to you as friend or foe, know that now you belong to God. You are the glad possession of the One who has made all things, and the One who makes all things new (Revelation 21:5). You are marked, for the Lord.

Until we meet you again at this font in a time in your life still yet to come, on a day when you will speak of these things for yourself, know that we remain,

New Wilmington Presbyterian Church,
your sisters and brothers in Christ, *marked by Jesus*.

Amen.