



**Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush**  
**Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

**January 12, 2025**

### **The Intentionality of Baptism**

For years, every newspaper had an advice columnist – someone like Dear Abby or Ann Landers who answered questions about life and relationships. Recently, though, I read a column in which someone asked a really tough question. The woman said, “I’m 33 years old and for a long time I’ve wanted to start a family. But in view of climate change and the wars going on, I fear for the world. It feels like everything is falling apart. Should I reconsider my plans?”<sup>1</sup> The columnist’s answer acknowledged that there is uncertainty in life, but stressed that the choice to have a baby is an act of hope for the future. Left unresolved in this column was a deeper question about how we understand the nature of life itself. Is life good or bad, trustworthy or not? And what exactly is the meaning of life? That’s a really complicated question. Inside these walls there is an answer we believe and celebrate, which I’ll get to in a moment. But outside these walls, out in the world, there are others who claim to know the meaning of life. And we need to deal with them first.

In the 1850s, Charles Darwin published The Origin of Species, which outlined his theory of evolution. Suddenly the meaning of life came down to survival – the survival of the fittest – a biological law that shaped the progression from early primates to Homo Sapiens to modern human beings today. In the 1860s, Karl Marx described human beings as captive to laws of economics, so that the meaning of life was something shaped by profit, power, and choices made by the bourgeois. In the 1920s, Sigmund Freud began to psychoanalyze people and determined that the ways we make sense of the world around us arise from a subconscious battle between our id, our ego, and our superego. Others waded into this discussion as well. Friedrich Nietzsche thought life didn’t have any meaning at all; we simply create whatever meaning works for ourselves. Jean-Paul Sartre and the Existentialists basically agreed with that and thought life only has the meaning we individually give to it.

More recently, a different answer has been offered about the meaning of life. Efficiency experts and life coaches want to help us do as much as we can in the limited time on earth we each have. They remind us that if we live to be 80 years old, that only amounts to about 4000 weeks of life. Lucky enough to live to be 90? Your life is still just shy of 4700 weeks. That’s why they want us to make every day count and sell us books on lifestyle hacks: Empty your email inbox. Color-code your day planner. Make a bucket list; track your health on your watch; let apps and computers and Smartphones help with everything. The problem is: no matter how efficiently you do everything, there is always more of everything just waiting in the wings – more emails to answer, more

books to read, more news to catch up on, more exotic places to add to your bucket list. If being efficient is the meaning of life, it's no wonder we're so exhausted and asking whether this is a world into which it makes sense to bring a child.

I'm a big fan of Marilynne Robinson. I've read just about everything she's written and I owe this next point to her. Robinson doesn't deny that there is a lot of truth in the secular theories about the meaning of life. Darwin's evolution is real, as is Marx's economic theory and Freud's psychoanalysis. There's even truth in Nietzsche's skepticism, Sartre's existentialism, and modern lifestyle coaches' efficiency tips. But if you ask any one of these experts why is there something instead of nothing, they'll tell you that we're an accident of history.<sup>2</sup> By chance and genetic mutations over millions of years, we evolved to who we are now. By economic exploitation and egotistical personalities, governments and civilization emerged. Luck and fate, so they say, got us to where we are today: thus we are accidents of history existing fairly comfortably in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The problem with this answer is that it's not much of a theory of life. It doesn't inspire us. It doesn't engender hope. But such is the story commonly told outside these walls.

There is so much that Darwin, Marx, and Freud leave out of the human equation. They dismiss most of history, art, and culture. They downplay human creativity and all religious inspiration. Meanwhile, inside these walls we reject the idea that all of life is an accident. We believe that there is an intentionality to life. And one wonderful way we celebrate this fact involves something we just experienced for ourselves. It involves the sacrament of baptism.

Baptism is one of the two sacraments of the Presbyterian Church; communion is the other. As you saw, it involves a person coming forward – or a child being presented before the church – followed by a symbolic washing with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a sign, pointing to a larger reality around us, and a seal making real the ideas of community and forgiveness designated by the sign. It is an act literally overflowing with meaning. Baptism is a washing away of impurities. It is like being bathed and made clean when you're recovering from an illness. It is a reminder of the amniotic waters of a mother's womb and symbolizes new birth. It also reminds us of being submerged in deep waters as if closed in a dark tomb, and when we burst back to the surface and come forth from the waters it is as if we're newly resurrected.

In a world where so much divides us, baptism is something that unites Christians the world over. It connects Catholics and Protestants, in that we recognize each other's baptisms. If you wanted to join Immanuel after having been baptized Catholic, or if some day you decided to join a Catholic parish, you wouldn't need to be baptized again. We accept one another's baptisms. Lastly, it is a sacrament of welcome. Every child, every person baptized changes the church for good as their gifts and spirit become part of the gifts and ministry of the church universal.

But more important than all those reasons is the fact that baptism proclaims that life isn't an accident. It announces that there is a God who made us, a God who loves us and seeks what is just for all people. This God opened the heavens and comes to us, walks with us, and leads us forward in the ways of truth and righteousness. In baptism we affirm our trust in this God, imperfect though our faith may be, and in so doing we proclaim to the world that life has intention and meaning.

Let me tell you a true story. After graduating from seminary, I spent three years serving a Presbyterian church in Zimbabwe, Africa. It was a congregation with six preaching stations, including one in a mining community in which the members spoke Shona and for which I needed a translator to lead worship. So one Sunday I went to lead worship there with my colleague and translator, a young bible college student named Japheth Matekenya. There was no church building; we met for worship in an outdoor school classroom. I'd been told there were about 20 people, mostly babies, who needed to be baptized that day. After the sermon I invited the children and adults to come forward for this sacrament. I said a few words, which Japheth translated, but then his voice changed. He began to speak quite rapidly and sternly to the group. At which point about half the mothers holding babies left the classroom entirely.

I asked Japheth what was going on. He said that he'd noticed tied around the ankles of many of the babies were small glass beads on leather cords. It wasn't jewelry but rather charms purchased from indigenous spirit-leaders that some believed had the power to protect the babies from harm. Japheth had told the parents they were bringing their children to be baptized into Christ Jesus, and they needed to put their full trust and confidence in the Lord and not magical bracelets. Soon the women and babies returned having cut off the anklets, and for literally the next 20-30 minutes, I was busy offering baptism waters in the name of the one God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I was a stranger to Zimbabwean culture and a guest in their country. At that moment, I had to trust what Japheth told me. But on that day over 35 years ago, just like today, baptism meant a choice - a stepping away from one reality, one narrative about the meaning of life, and moving toward another reality, an awareness that life isn't blind fate or a biological accident. Baptism proclaims that life has meaning; life's foundation rests upon One bigger than all of us, and by whose grace and intentions we walk our earthly ways.

I began by saying that an advice columnist was asked about the wisdom of bringing a baby into our troubled world. It was a question about whether life has meaning and if there is a reason to have hope. If Darwin and others are the ones providing answers for that advice column, they would likely offer discouraging words - stressing that life is just a lucky accident, a mix of fate and chance and genetics. Their words may sound scientific and rational, but it narrows life down as if you've just walked into a dark closet. A different answer was given a long time ago, when Jesus stepped into the waters of the

Jordan River. The heavens opened; the Holy Spirit like a dove descended gracefully; and a voice said, "This is my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." No accident here. A clear intentionality was revealed – a connection on earth with the heavenly source of life that brings hope to all of us.

Accepting this intentionality is like stepping through a door into a world of opportunity. For if life is shaped and guided by a loving God, a God who is beside us for the entire journey ahead, then why wouldn't we see children as signs of hope? Why wouldn't we speak up for justice and act with compassion trusting that our tomorrows can be better than our yesterdays? So, in the words from the book of Joshua, choose this day whom you will serve. Come with intentionality to the waters of baptism. Christ is waiting for you there. AMEN

---

<sup>1</sup> Kwame Appiah, *NY Times Magazine*, January 5, 2025 – The Ethicist, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, p. 71-72.