

“CHURCH: The Hopeful Dead”

Romans 6:3-11

What exactly is this thing we call the church? For the last month and a half in our sermon series we've been asking ourselves this question. We say, “I'm going to church Sunday,” and we sing “The church's one foundation” but what are we actually saying when we say that word “church”?

In this last month we've learned some of what it means to say the “church.” So today I'm going to see if you have remembered any of it with a few questions. Okay, so first question: does anyone—besides Linda who has an advantage since she does the bulletins—know what *word* it is we've been spelling out this past month?

Our first Sunday, “C” we learned that the church is the **C**ompanions of God. We're the Lord's friends who break bread with him. Now our second Sunday was “H.” Does anybody know what the “H” stands for?

“U” was **u**nincorporated area—that we the church are free to go in and

go out of the world's constraints, and that we find safe pasture with Jesus our shepherd. For “R” Keith Madsen came back and preached on the church being God's “reconciling community.” And now here's my final question. Whoever answers this right get the grand prize of a high-five from your neighbor. Last week I preached on the Song of Songs and the second to last letter, letter “C,” in C-H-U-R-C-H. Does anyone remember what last week's sermon title was? It started with a “C.”

So today is our final day. It's our final day of looking at what exactly is this thing that we do called church. And what better way to spend our *last* Sunday on the church than on the *first* thing we do as a part of the church: *baptism*.

Baptism. For some of us, we can remember like yesterday how it felt when the water rushed over our head and strong arms pulled us up out of the water. For others of us, we were just a babe cradled in our pastor's arms with water running down our head. Maybe others of us, we've

skirted being baptized—perhaps embarrassed thinking we’re too old or skeptical of what the whole thing is about or perhaps we’ve actually longed for baptism’s waters and yet been unsure how to ask. [For any of you in these last three categories, my door is always open.]

Baptism is our first step into our life as a member of the church. In baptism, we are knit together with the Body of Christ. We publically declare our faith and align ourselves with Jesus. As we go under the water the one baptizing us declares the words of Romans, “You have been buried with Christ by baptism into death,” and then as we’re pulled up, the first words we hear are “So that we might be raised to walk in newness of life.”

Baptism is death. And baptism is life. “I have died with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me.”

A baptized life is a life participating in Christ’s death. The church is, *in a very real way*, the **living dead**. We have died with Christ. It’s just that in dying with Christ, we’ve also paradoxically found the only life that is truly *alive*.

It’s truly alive because what do those who are already dead have to fear? We have been crucified with Christ! We’re like a person who has gotten a terminal diagnosis. We can’t help but live in light of our deaths. Now that may sound morbid, but it’s not. See here’s the thing: every single person has a terminal diagnosis. It’s called being mortal. But so many of us live ignoring the fact of our future death because if we’re honest, we’re afraid of dying.

Fear is the opposite of life. Fear strips us of all of the things that make life, life. Things like joy and spontaneity and generosity.

A baptized life no longer has to fear. We’ve died. In some way, according to the Bible we’ve already gotten that out of the way. Now we’re free to live.

The waters of baptism are the waters of death, but waters of baptism, they are also the waters of the newness of LIFE.

I’ve been thinking a lot about waters recently because I have taken up swimming in the Snoqualmie River. Turns out its not a popular hobby.

I'm usually the *only* person swimming in the Snoqualmie River. Most people just yell at me, "How's it feel out there?" (cold) and stay on the shore.

As I've paddled around, I've done a lot of thinking about the river's water—especially the current. Has anyone here ever tried to swim in a river before? Or kayaked or inner-tubed? There's a reason why down at the Snoqualmie they have beware of current signs! Once you get into the river's flow you can really get going. Whether you like it or not you are going *downstream*.

If you're really in the current, you don't even have to paddle that hard. The river just carries you. Every so often you maybe have to take a couple of swift strokes to the left or put your oar down to the right to avoid the shore's edges, but if you're in the current, the river will have its way. The river started way up higher than we can see it way up in the mountain snowmelt and its waters are going to keep on flowing all the way out to Puget Sound and then the Pacific Ocean. You're just along for the ride.

Baptism is our big jump into God's river. It's our step off the shore and into the current of the kingdom of God. Like the Snoqualmie, this river has started where we cannot see it. See there are many rivers in the world, but this river is the only river that comes flowing down out of heaven.

The heavenly river is the church. Now saying that the river is the church does not mean that all of your fellow travelers on the river are going to be river-of-God Olympic grade swimmers. Most of our fellow swimmers, our brothers and sisters in Christ, are going to be doggy-paddling just like us. Remember the church isn't just the river of God, it's also a hospital for sinners. Sometimes they might jostle us, sometimes they might swim for shore because they're tired, sometimes they might try to grab onto you like a life-jacket and accidentally pull you under the water with them.

See there's a trick to swimming in the river of God. *You have to relax*. You have to relax, and let God's current take you. Our baptismal waters wants to lift us up, buoy us and carry us to where we need to go

if we just let them. We might not always be able to see the spiritual mountaintops where the river originated, that fervor we felt when we first knew Christ as our Savior. And we might not always be able to see the river's end when we see God face-to-face. But here in this middle time as we swim along in God's river, the church, we can take a deep breath, stretch out our limbs and let the waters take us, for the river of God is flowing towards salvation.

Now, that's not to say that this river we're on is an *easy* river. At the church I served in Dallas, George the senior pastor, always says when he's dedicating babies, "May you have a good life. Not an easy life, but a good life." The river of God isn't necessarily an easy river. Sometimes this river we're on seems to be flowing in the opposite direction of the other rivers we see. Sometimes this river flows through countryside we didn't want to go through. It's not always an easy river.

Remember our baptism is the big leap into the holy river, and baptism means being baptized into Christ's death. When we get into God's river, we die in a certain way. We die to

doing things our own way. We die to sticking our head in the sand and thinking that whatever river we're swimming in, it's okay, we'll never have to meet the river's end. We die to staying up on dry land trying to carve out our own rivers with sticks in the mud. We die.

But we also for the first time really live. See if we had been successful in carving that river out of the mud with our sticks and shovels, we would have known exactly all the twists and turns of the river's course. There would have been no surprises. But what's one of the most fun parts of floating down a river? It's the view you never saw of Mount Rainier before. It's going round the bend and spotting a bald eagle.

The river of God isn't an easy river, but it's a good river. It's the kind of river that will suck the fear of death right out of you and fill you with the joy of living. It's the kind of river that makes the living dead hopeful. We, the dead in Christ, can be hopeful because the river we're in is God's river and God's plan is to take us to the ocean of divine love where he will wipe every tear from our eyes, and death will be no more, and

mourning and crying and pain will
all be done away with.

We are swimming in God's river.
We are swimming in the river whose
waters are to us both death and
everlasting life.

We here today are the church.

We are the dead who have the sure
hope of new life. Hear the words of
Revelation, chapter 22: "Then the
angel showed me the river of the
water of life, bright as crystal,
flowing from the throne of God and
of the Lamb through the middle of
the street of the city" (Rev. 22:1-2a).
The river will carry us home, to the
divine city, a Bride adorned for her
Bridegroom. The river will carry us
to God.