
Wet and Washed in Christ

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
The Feast of St. Philip – Year C

Two phrases from today's delightful story of St. Philip the deacon and the Ethiopian eunuch! St. Philip, for whom our cathedral parish is named, was called to go down "a wilderness road," (Acts 8:26); and, later, both St. Philip AND the eunuch "went down into the water," where Philip baptized him (Acts 8:38).

"On a desert road," and "they BOTH went down into the water."

The tremendous Apple computer company has announced a new operating system for its computers. As most of you know, they do not merely number their new systems. They give them names, usually names from California. (But that's okay — they are a California company!) They've named their systems with such titles as Yosemite, El Capitan, High Sierra, Mohave. Their newest operating system is named Catalina.

Well, I know Catalina. Catalina is for Catalina Island, a rather beautiful place off the coast of California. Remember "Twenty-six miles across the sea, Santa Catalina is waiting for me?" It's a day trip ferry ride for most people. Others stay a while and enjoy its interior desert and beautiful hills.

I enjoyed it, because I worked there one summer when I was in college. I had ended up in California, because I needed a desert place. A desert road. Having grown up in the rural hills of Georgia, I needed a place to find myself, my true self. I set out to play jazz music in California.

I ended up in many a desert place. I ended up, one summer, leading Bible studies for young people on the beach of Santa Catalina Island. I was leading people to Christ, while I was working for Hollywood Presbyterian Church. On my off days, I would hike into the desert hills.

Those were the days when we did not care who was ordained or not. We would have a eucharist meal together. Different people presided. We would lay hands on people. We would baptize, not caring at all who was properly ordained.

Yes, we would baptize. One of the most exciting sacramental acts of my entire life, even as I count up my years now, was baptizing people in California. It was exciting, because we baptized people in the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific Ocean was our baptismal font.

Later in my life, when I was at Yale Divinity School, another kind of desert, studying theology, I would learn from a delightful Roman Catholic liturgy professor, who broke most rules of teaching and liturgy as he taught us the truth. (He smoked cigarettes from a long cigarette holder!) One time a student asked him, "Professor, I know we believe in infant baptism, and we use beautiful little silver bowls from which to sprinkle water on these gorgeous babies, but... here's the theological question: How much water do we officially need, in order for the baptism to be valid? What is the right amount of water?"

Professor Kavanaugh leaned back his wise head and answered in a most direct tone: "In order for a baptism to be effective, you must provide enough water to drown in!" We shuddered. Not many people think of drowning when we think of

baptizing infants. But his point was valid. Effective baptism is about dying to an old life and rising to a new one. The most effective symbolic amount of water is enough to show us symbolically that we might drown. Baptism should be a bit scary.

Well, out in California when I baptized people in the Pacific Ocean, I almost drowned. Have any of you ever stood in the waves of the Pacific Ocean? It's not like the Atlantic Ocean. Out there, the waves are tremendous! They are way over our heads, and mighty and crashing. When I stood out in those waves baptizing, I risked drowning. It was scary. And it was beautiful.

The word "baptism" does not mean sprinkle, except in a most minor symbolic way. The word baptism means "washing."

I sometimes think we should re-name our liturgy so that we do not use the word, baptism. Instead, it's a washing, an immersion. Today, we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Washing. Have any of you ever taken a bath without getting your head wet? No, we are supposed to get our heads wet! We are supposed to be washed. Babies are sometimes rightfully scared when they take a bath; they are going underwater!

We are not supposed to be merely "baptized into Christ." We are supposed to be "washed into Christ." We are supposed to be immersed into Christ.

That is what we need. That is what the world needs. Not just to be touched with Christ. We are supposed to be washed with Christ. To go under water with Christ. We are supposed to be washed, washed with love and truth and justice and glory and honor. Those are the qualities of Christ. That's who Christ is. That is supposed to be the new life we are immersed into, in baptism.

Of course, people being baptized, whether young or old, rarely know what all this means. They are new in Christ.

But we, we in the church, are supposed to know! We parents and parishioners are supposed to know! After all, we are the ones doing the washing, the pouring, the immersing. Not just the priest. The community!

I believe that is why The Book of Acts says that Philip the deacon got down into the water with the Ethiopian eunuch in order to do the baptism. He got wet, too. He got washed, too. He stepped into the wild Pacific Ocean, too.

All of us need a Philip. All of us need a Philip in our lives, someone who is willing to walk down the desert road with us. Someone willing to sit with us in our chariot. Someone willing to hear our questions and our pains. We need that brave fellow pilgrim, someone to be companion in our trouble, someone willing to sit with us, someone willing hear the sometimes horrendous and awful things we are going through

And then, and then, we need that person to get into the water with us. We need someone willing to get wet and messy with us. And we need someone to be soaking wet and dripping with us. We need someone willing to risk being drowned with us. That person is Christ to us.

That, all that, is what it means to be washed in Christ.

Will we, the Cathedral of St. Philip, be that person today? Will we be Philip to someone? Will we travel down a desert road with a person in need? Will we get down into the wet water with a person who needs to be washed in Christ?

If so, then we are truly celebrating Holy Washing today, Holy Baptism. We are letting the person and the glory of Christ wash over us, and into us, and through us.

AMEN.

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