

*This message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church on the occasion of the baptism of Lana Elaine Riley, September eighth, the thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, in the year of our LORD two thousand and nineteen.*

**Matthew 3:1-4:1**

**1** In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,  
**2** "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."  
**3** This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." "  
**4** Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.  
**5** Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,  
**6** and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.  
**7** But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?  
**8** Bear fruit worthy of repentance.  
**9** Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.  
**10** Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.  
**11** "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.  
**12** His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."  
**13** Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.  
**14** John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"  
**15** But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.  
**16** And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.  
**17** And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."  
**1** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

**I**n our Bible story for today righteousness steps up  
and love is shouted from the heavens!

From John's point of view,  
Jesus' baptism makes little sense.  
John declared a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Well, Jesus had no sin, so what was the point? *Shouldn't you be baptizing **me**, Jesus?!*

It seems to me that Jesus sees baptism differently than John saw it.  
That baptism is not as much about sin  
as it is about signing up;  
not so much about a ritual act of cleanliness  
as it is about diving into a river that is moving under God's power;

a power with a determination that will set all things right.

Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

*“God’s work, putting things right all these centuries,  
is coming together right now in this baptism.”*

“God’s work, putting things right all these centuries,  
is coming together right now in Jesus’ baptism...

In Lana’s baptism...

If we see baptism solely as a ritual act,

it is hard to imagine how it can fulfill righteousness.

But when baptism is seen as the inauguration of ministry;

as the commencement of relationship;

as the launching of a life linked forever with Christ to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God;

When Baptism is seen as the seal set upon us by the God of Grace who is calling us to join in setting all things right,

then it becomes full and rich and filled with meaning for Jesus and for Lana Elaine and for the church and for the Heavenly Parent and for the Holy Spirit.

In the story of Jesus there is a precious moment when the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove.

O, soon enough this Spirit will become fierce and drive Jesus into the wilderness so that he may do battle with Satan.

But for a moment perhaps the Holy Spirit finds it quite pleasant to simply rest lightly on the human shoulder of her Trinitarian counterpart.

Again, this lovely picture should not be taken as though it represented a single moment in time, like a snap shot for a photo album.

No, this moment is a sign of the deep and abiding relationship of God the Parent and God the Child and God the Spirit.

Likewise, be assured that the Holy Spirit is resting this day on Lana Elaine.

It is through the Holy Spirit that Lana is born from above;

it is through the Holy Spirit that she is given the gift of faith;

it is through the Holy Spirit that she will bear fruit that will nourish her world;

it is through the Holy Spirit that she will live into her name “Little Rock of Light”;

it is through the Holy Spirit that she too will be driven into the wilderness

and will be given the wisdom to turn evil on its head doing battle without human blades of steel,

but with the Word of God that is sharper than any two edged sword.

Baptism is a commissioning.

A soldier does not go into battle without knowing her rank.

Neither does Lana set out in this world without being commissioned “Beloved Child of God”.

At her core, Lana is a person made in the image and likeness of God.

Just as her physical DNA makes it clear that she belongs to you, Kristi and Steve;

so too her spiritual DNA reveals who she belongs to. She may become a doctor or an astronaut

or the CEO of Seeger Metals and Plastics

or a teacher or an engineer

or a farmer or a nurse

or a mother or a friend.

She may call herself by many names,  
“Hi! I’m Lana and I am a daughter;  
I am a sister;  
I am a student;  
I am a runner, a skier, a gardener, an artist;  
I am a member of Tontogany Presbyterian Church.”

She may call herself by many fleeting names,  
but what God calls her is the lasting, the most fundamental and eternal truth:  
Lana Elaine Riley: ***Beloved Child of God.***

It is your privilege, people of prayer,  
to remind her whose she is.

You have the opportunity to help her remember her baptism,  
her inauguration,  
her commission.

David Loose suggests that we would do well as families, as churches to celebrate the anniversary of baptisms as we do our birthdays.  
That every year, year after year, we ought to make a big deal of our baptism dates.

What is your birthday?  
What is your baptism date?

As a church you have a simple tradition to recognize birthdays.  
You sing “Happy Birthday” during coffee hour.

What if you adopt a little song to recognize the anniversaries of baptisms?

How about this one:

*Go my child with my blessing, never alone.  
Waking, sleeping, I am with you, you are my own.  
In my love’s baptismal river,  
I have made you mine forever.  
Go my child with my blessing, you are my own.*

(adapted from Author Jaroslav J. Vajda, text copyright Concordia Publishing House, 1983;  
Welsh melody, AR HYDY NOS)

And for some final instructions:

People of Prayer,  
it is your responsibility to go with Lana even when, especially when it means going into the wilderness.  
Sometimes the waters of baptism are deep and ferocious.  
Sometimes joining Jesus in his baptism means being swept where you don’t want to go;  
being lifted and tossed about;  
being pulled under, not sure when you will come up.  
Will you go with her in this baptismal river?  
Will you hold her fast over the rapids and past the boulders?

Be careful with this little one.  
God has given her a pleasant spirit.  
See to it that it is guarded at every turn.  
Be mindful of this Beloved Child of God, after all, what is more needed in the midnight of the soul than a  
“Little Rock of Light” to set all things right?

*Ephesians 3:14-21*

For this reason we bow my knees before our Heavenly Parent,  
from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.  
I pray that, according to the riches of God’s glory,  
God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being  
with power through God’s Spirit,  
and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith,  
as you are being rooted and grounded in love.  
I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints,  
what is  
the breadth  
and length  
and height  
and depth,  
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,  
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.  
Now to the One who by the power at work within us  
is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,  
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus  
to all generations,  
forever and ever.  
Amen.