

Why baptize? (Mark 1:4-11)

And why would anyone baptize the dead?

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I have baptized infants and elderly people. I have baptized in lakes, church buildings, living rooms, and hospitals. I have baptized the obviously sinful and the seemingly sainted. I have baptized the living. I have also baptized the dead. Once.

Baptism of the Lord Sunday comes with a set of often unspoken assumptions about the baptisms we offer. The assumption when we baptize is that the one seeking baptism is a sinner. We further assume that, in baptism, said sinner is washed clean. Further, we assume that the baptized will daily remember that forgiven fact. The assumption behind those three assumptions is that the baptized sinner will live to tell about it.

Simply put, we baptize the living for life. Why would anyone baptize the dead?

Weeks before her due date, a member of my parish went into labor. Within hours, it became clear that this would be no ordinary labor, no easy delivery. The hospital staff worked heroically to save both mother and child. But by the time I was called to her bedside, the child had been born—stillborn. The mother had survived, though she would rather have died with her child.

I stepped into the delivery room while the child was still warm, her parents sobbing over her beautiful but lifeless body. The mother looked up at me, and said simply, “Please baptize her.” And though it is not my practice to baptize the dead, I said, “Of course.”

The attending nurse filled an emesis basin with warm water. The child's grandparents and midwife were our congregation. With tears streaming down all our faces, we baptized and named her—Emily Rose. Two days later, we laid her tiny casket in the ground.

Emily Rose had been birthed immediately into the arms of her Creator. She would not know sin. She would not need to be forgiven. She did not need to be baptized. Except that she did—for the sake of her parents, Emily Rose needed to be baptized.

For centuries we have wondered about the necessity of Jesus' baptism. After all, why would the sinless Son of God need to repent of anything? In other ways, we wonder about the necessity of our own baptisms. If all are loved by God, if salvation is freely given to both washed and unwashed, what does baptism mean?

Why baptize? God has no need of our baptism. But we do. We need to hear; we need to know. Whether emerging from the waters of the womb or the waters of a river, we need to hear again that we are beloved.

As is Emily Rose, beloved Child of God.