

My son the PK said no to baptism

For now, anyway. After our discernment together, I consider this a success.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

Published on May 2, 2024



(Illustration by Mary Haasdyk Vooys)

Two years ago, when my middle child was ten, he announced that he was ready to explore baptism. Over the course of his life Wick has watched many people enter the fellowship of the church. He's sung hymns on the lip of a swollen river. He's watched

as I submerge bodies into the waters in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He has prayed over the dripping, beaming faces that stumbled back onto the bank, suddenly new.

We were in an awkward position. He's the pastor's kid, and at the time no one else had come forward to request this rite. But we forged ahead with a plan to explore baptism together, just the two of us. We'd talk about baptism in the Bible and ask questions about what we heard. We would invite others to tell us about their baptism and how it shaped their lives. We would talk about our spiritual ancestors who died confronting the practice of infant baptism that defined the church in the 16th century.

We carved out space on Sunday mornings to sit and talk, to read and ask, to listen and question. One morning we walked around the church, interviewing people whose paths we crossed. They were surprised but mostly delighted to talk with us about their baptism.

The next Sunday I made a set of cards with words like *war*, *work*, and *money*. Several members of the congregation joined us. Wick asked each person how baptism shaped their lives in one of these areas. I could see my son's eyes widen as one man shared how, for him, a baptismal life meant letting go of a career that made a lot of money and instead joining a helping profession. Someone else shared about how nonviolence means more than not going to war—we are called to *love* our enemies.

That night, as we snuggled before lights out, Wick turned his head to me. "Mom, I don't think I'm ready to be baptized. You're not sad, are you?" I told him no, that I was proud of him for discerning that he still had questions, that he still needed to be convinced this Jesus life is a good idea. "When we're baptized, we're saying 'I love you' back to the one who has always loved us and always will," I told him. "And saying 'I love you' makes a kind of life. Those words make a home."

"Mom, getting baptized seems like getting a tattoo. If you're going to do it, you want to be sure." I smiled as he ran his hand over the tattoo of the annunciation on my shoulder, a decision that was several decades in the making. "That's a good metaphor, Wick. But we'll never be able to figure everything out. Maybe this is the question: Do I want to keep figuring out my life with Jesus and with other people who also love Jesus?"

“That makes sense,” he replied. “Did I tell you what I built in Minecraft today?” And like that, the baptism conversation was done.

Believers’ baptism traditions are often criticized, and with good reason, for demanding that catechumens get the words and concepts right, a kind of faith test one must pass with flying colors. But for Wick, knowing Jesus wasn’t the hard part. In his life, God is assumed, in the air, or as Christian Wiman writes, “so woven into reality that the question of God’s own reality can’t meaningfully occur.”

Rather than spiritual acumen, the Mennonite Church looks to the call stories in the gospels to interpret our baptismal practice. In one of those stories Simon Peter, James, and John are fishing when Jesus happens upon them. They recognize him, and that recognition calls forth an act—they leave behind their nets. But the nets of this life are only now coming into view for my child. What kind of life will he forge? What other gods await to demand his allegiance?

One day, seemingly out of nowhere, a Roman centurion named Marcellus of Tangier threw down his soldier’s belt holding his weapons. When tried before a judge who asked what madness caused this blasphemous rejection of Roman military power, Marcellus is said to have declared, “No madness possesses those who fear the Lord. . . for it is not fitting that a Christian, who fights for Christ his Lord, should fight for the armies of this world.” Marcellus was executed.

It is likely Marcellus was preparing for baptism. Over the course of his catechesis, he discovered who Jesus is and determined that the life of a soldier was incompatible with that of a Christian. Marcellus required clarity not about Jesus alone but about the life that is wrought from this encounter, the stuff that is thrown down before entering the waters of baptism.

I spoke to a friend, also a Mennonite pastor, about Wick’s decision to wait for baptism. “So the baptism preparation was a success,” he said, and I agreed. We both hope Wick will choose baptism one day, but we also know that in those weeks of discernment he was offered space to encounter and reject the peculiar life we live as Christians. Believers’ baptism is pacifism; it’s one way we form community without violence. When those seeking baptism say “not yet,” we know that we have not coerced or baited them, that we have not forced someone into a life of faith.

As it is, Wick will need to be convinced—convinced by the lives he sees that this baptismal life is one worth living. I take this call seriously, both as his pastor and his

mom.

I also know this is the work of many. When Wick was a baby I held him in front of me, his chunky legs kicking at the air. Before the church I offered my child to God's care. The church surrounded him and made a promise: they would give him reason for the faith they had. I believed them then, and I believe them today. As he grows, he'll discover the nets of this life. But I trust that the people of our church will show Wick how to lay them down, that together we will live convincing lives of faith. I trust that someday, by God's immense and unknowable grace, the one I dip into the waters of baptism will be my child.