

Sarah was at the kitchen sink, washing the last of the breakfast dishes. Her 2 older children were off to school- the bus had left just a few minutes before- and Pete, her 4 year old was busy coloring pictures and preparing his daily morning story. Pete LOVED making up stories, and it had become a morning routine for him to prepare a special story to share with her every morning. When the kitchen had been reasonably reorganized after the morning bustle of breakfast, lunch-packing, homework-checking and filling backpacks, she and Sam would sit down together and he would share his newest story. Lately he had become especially fond of stories about their cat, Orion. According to Pete, he and Orion had some very amazing and very creative adventures together which he loved sharing with his mom... "And Mom," he would assure her with each tale, "it's not made up. It REALLY happened!"

This morning, Pete suddenly appeared at the kitchen doorway, wide-eyed, breathless and excited. "Mom!! Come quick!! There are baby kitties with Orion."

"Pete, hold on to your story," Sarah said, laughing at his excitement. "I'm almost finished here. Then we'll sit together and you can tell me the whole story."

"No, Mom, no. It's not a story, I promise. You have to come RIGHT NOW! There are 3 of them and they're all wet and they're making these funny little noises."

Suddenly Sarah made a startling connection: they had THOUGHT Orion had gained some weight... but it hadn't seemed that significant. What if Pete was really NOT making this up. She quickly dried her hands and said, "Come on Pete. Show me."

Sure enough, there in a corner of the bathroom, on a bath towel left in a heap by her 11 year old, Orion was busy licking at the wet fur of three tiny, newborn kittens.

"See Mom," Pete announced proudly. "I TOLD you I didn't make it up."

Sometimes, we really don't pay much attention to stories. Maybe because we are busy or distracted, maybe because we think they're mostly made up- nothing to get very excited about.

Sometimes it's because the story is one that we've heard so often, that it has lost some of its freshness or excitement. And sometimes it's because the story comes to us in a written form, and the energy and excitement of the original story-teller has been lost.

Lutheran pastor, Walter Wangerin has a gift for telling biblical stories in new ways- adding color and details to help bring ancient stories to life to those of us hearing them thousands of years later.

The story of Jesus baptism is one many of us have heard many times. But listen to this ancient story told by Pastor Wangerin, from his book "The Story of God: The Bible as a Novel"

*IN THE MIDST of the multitudes that came daily to the Jordan for baptism, there appeared one figure separated from the rest. John turned and saw the man standing upriver among some reeds, waiting.*

*Reflected sunlight played upward from the water on his face, trilling the flesh below his eyebrows and cheekbones, below his nose and his chin. He had amber eyes, gazing directly at John. He was clean-shaven, like a Roman—or, it occurred to John, like one of the prophets mournful for the future, for they would shave their beards. Amber eyes! John recognized those golden corneas, polished, laconic, and nearly translucent. No one else had such a fathomless gaze. This must be the cousin John had not seen since the Passover when his father had died. Eighteen years ago! Eighteen years, and still those eyes had that lidded rich regard. This was the one of whom his mother had said once, "He is my Lord." The man among the reeds lifted his hand in greeting. John nodded. Jesus, then! This was Jesus! Jesus began to wade downriver, to the deeper water where John was standing.*

*When they stood face-to-face, John saw copper flecks in the iris of his cousin's eye. Jesus said, "John, baptize me." For a moment John hesitated. "John," said Jesus, "baptize me."*

*Without waiting for an assent, he closed his eyes, sank down and slipped under the water. His long hair lingered on the surface for a short while, then it, too, was pulled down into darkness and disappeared. These were swift, breathless events for John. So much raced through his mind: his family, his past, his fierce convictions, the future of his people, Israel. The day and the weather and all events now tightened down to one small focus: this air, this round patch of river, flat and calm in the sunlight, and this sudden, preternatural silence. Time seemed to collapse—and when John came to himself he could not remember how long Jesus had been lying on the riverbed. In a quick panic he slapped the water with the flat of his hand and cried: "Child of the light and the kingdom to come, rise up!" There was a continued, shining silence—then Jesus, like a great fish, heaved from the water, and immediately the heavens above them split asunder and there flew down a dove, a white dove, a blinding white dove which alighted on the shoulder of Jesus—white fire beside his face—and in that same instant a voice broke from heaven, saying: This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Immediately Jesus began to move from John toward the eastern shore of the river. His expression was intense but unreadable. His manner seemed so nearly wolfish—like a predator following an invisible scent—that the people on land backed away and made a path for him. Jesus was withdrawing from the public with some fierce purpose. And then John saw that the white dove was flying in spirals ahead of Jesus, leading the way. Oh, that*

*was no common dove! That was none other than the Holy Spirit who had brooded over the wild waters of creation and then again the waters of the flood! John folded his huge hands at his throat and whispered: "You, Jesus, greater than me—your life shall be more terrible than mine. Wherever the Holy Spirit is driving you now, God help you there! God help you, cousin."*

*The Story of God, Walter Wangerin, Zondervan pp 465-466*

When we talk about Jesus' baptism, one of the most common questions to be raised is: Why would Jesus need to be baptized?

We ask the question because usually when we think of baptism, the first connection we make is "forgiveness of sin." And yes, we DO believe that forgiveness of sin is one of the gifts of baptism.

But if we spend a little time looking at Jesus' baptism, believing that his baptism is a model and a pattern for our own, something else becomes clear. At this critical moment, when he was about to embark on a most difficult 3 year journey, God established very clearly the deeply intimate and personal relationship between God and Jesus:

"You are my Son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased."

The primary purpose of Jesus' baptism is the announcement of the relationship.

And we are called to the waters of baptism for the same reason: the announcement of our relationship and sons and daughters of God.

Jesus kept that relationship as his primary focus for his entire life. And while we regularly fail to be as centered in our relationship with God, it's important to recognize that God never fails to be centered in God's love for us. THAT is the extraordinary gift of our baptisms:

That God ALWAYS loves us, that God ALWAYS claims us, that God ALWAYS forgives us, that we, too, are beloved children of God.

One of the things I love about our sanctuary is that the baptismal font sits at the entrance, reminding us that we are baptized children of God. Dipping our fingers into that water as we enter and as we depart into the world and making the sign of the cross, is a reminder of our own baptism, of God's claim on us as beloved children, of the forgiveness that comes to us daily, of being joined to Jesus in our shared mortality, the inevitability of our death and the promise of new life revealed in his resurrection.

As you pass that font- each time you enter or leave the sanctuary- may you hear in your heart the words spoken at YOUR baptism: "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ- FOREVER."

Amen.