• Raise your hands if you were baptized as an infant or young child.
• Raise your hands if you were baptized as a teen or adult.
• If you haven’t been baptized, hang in there and hear me out.

In the Presbyterian Church both infant baptism and believer’s baptism are recognized. That means, it doesn’t matter how old you are, and it doesn’t matter whether you are sprinkled, dripped, dipped, or dunked. It’s all good – it’s all acceptable.

You may remember from confirmation class or a new members’ class that baptism is one of two sacraments we observe in the Presbyterian Church. The other is Holy Communion. A sacrament is traditionally defined as an outward and visible sign of an inner, invisible grace. It demonstrates the reality claimed by the church that in life and in death we belong to God.

Now, in some churches, baptism is thought to guarantee salvation or maybe it serves to protect a child from evil intent. Our own Book of Order declares that every child of believing parents is to be baptized without undue delay. So we eagerly set the date and invite extended family and friends for the special occasion. Then, as the water trickles down the baby’s head, the congregation senses that a remarkable, almost magical act has taken place.

But is there really some divine magic that happens at our baptism? Does God do something in that moment that somehow changes who we are? Some parents have their baby baptized and then we don’t see them much any more. Do they feel that, once it’s done, their child has been mystically changed into a child of God so they can check that off their list?

We know that baptism doesn’t magically change us from sinners to saints. So, what actually does change in baptism? I’m going to suggest that nothing changes…..and yet, everything changes.

Recall Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism. and discover in these verses a lens through which to see a powerful truth about ourselves.

The story of Jesus’ baptism, as recorded in Mark, is emphasized by scholars and preachers as the beginning of his public ministry. It is that, but it is more than that. I want to suggest that the story is used by the author of the gospel to depict a transforming, spiritual experience for Jesus.

When Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan God’s voice from heaven declares….this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.  Mark is describing the moment that Jesus comes to full
conscious awareness and acceptance of his identity and his purpose. Because it is only when he recognizes who he is that he can then embrace what he is to do and accomplish with his life. And so it is, or should be, with us. Our vocation, our work, our purpose in life flows from our identity – that is, who we believe ourselves to be.

Jesus had an Aha moment during his baptism – a moment when he fully and consciously understood who he was as God’s beloved son. But what only takes a couple of verses for Jesus, takes us an entire lifetime. It takes a lifetime of “aha’s” -- of discovering again and again who we are as God’s beloved and to understand that our calling, our human vocation, becomes clear when we really accept our identity as beloved child of God. I’m not talking about selecting a particular job or profession; I am talking about what it means to live a truly human life – as Jesus so perfectly demonstrated.

So, Baptism may not be about God snatching us out of sinfulness. Baptism is not about washing us clean in order to make us acceptable to God. It is about publicly celebrating that we already are. The sacrament of infant baptism, particularly, celebrates the reality that before we can acknowledge it, or protest it, or celebrate it, we are already immersed in God -- the divine dwells in all .... and .... all humanity, all creation, dwells in God.

How many of you remember Toy Story 2? There is one scene that stood out for me and helps express what I think it means for a baptized child or adult to be nurtured in the church – to be taught the truth about who we are. In this scene, Woody, the little cowboy toy, is kidnapped and taken to the apartment of the “evil” toy collector.

Woody finds himself in a dark room, all alone. He manages to escape from the glass box he was put in, but he doesn’t know where he is or what he should do. At that moment, Jessie, the little cowgirl toy, sees Woody and recognizes him. Remember what she does? She practically attacks him, screaming, “Woody! It’s you, it’s you, it’s you!” Bullseye, the horse, and the Prospector recognize Woody too and are thrilled to see him. However, Woody, could not figure out why or how they knew him. The Prospector finally asks, “You don’t know who you are, do you?” Then Bullseye flips the light switch, and they show Woody the room filled with “Woody memorabilia.” He discovers that he was the most famous of movie star toys. It was Woody’s “aha” moment, when he recognized that he, Woody, is someone famous, someone who is adored by thousands of children.

How then does Woody’s story relate to our Christian baptism?

When this congregation makes a covenant in baptism to embrace the one baptized, the community becomes much like Woody’s friends, helping the baptized discover their identity as child of God and helping them live into their human vocation. Look about you; this sacred space is filled with our Christian memorabilia -- our stories, our rituals and sacraments, our sacred music and art, and our friends....our spiritual companions. All these things shape us and we in turn shape our community.

When I was a teenager getting ready to go out on a date, my mother would take me aside right before I walked out the door and she would look into my eyes and say, “remember who you are.” I knew exactly what she meant. She meant don’t do anything inappropriate; don’t get into trouble; and for heaven’s sake, don’t do anything to embarrass your family. In other words, my actions and character reflected upon my family because I belonged to them and was beloved by them.

I said earlier that what happens in just a few verses for Jesus, takes us a lifetime. It is true. We are baptized only once, because it celebrates an already reality and sets us on our spiritual path. The fact of God’s divine claim on the world never ceases to be true, but that reality and its implications break into our consciousness with new power and new insight over and over throughout our lives.

Recall the language from baptism: we are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection -- but not only what God, through Jesus, did for us once, long ago. I want to argue that death and resurrection
define the very nature of our lives. As we grow ... as we experience life with its pain, mistakes, losses, as well as its challenges, accomplishments, and celebrations, we change, which means our old self-image must die. If we are open, we can be set free, renewed, resurrected again and again, to a more complete understanding of who we are.

I want to close with a baptism story about a little boy who seemed to “get it.” A clergy friend of mine told me the story of a little 3 year old boy, named Brandon, and his 18 month old sister -- they would both be baptized on the same Sunday. My friend wanted to make sure Brandon knew what to expect that Sunday morning, so she went to his house the day before to visit with him. She described what would take place and told him what an important event this would be. She even let Brandon try baptizing his little stuffed cat.

During worship the next morning, Brandon was baptized first. Then, while his sister was being baptized, he just couldn’t stay away from the water and tried to quietly put his hand in the font. Well, his father took his hand and gently held it, but then the other little hand went up and into the water.

After both baptisms, the Elder gave Brandon a prayer shawl, which is a baptism tradition in their church. Brandon was so proud of his shawl that it immediately went around his shoulders like the cape of a super hero. Finally, as he walked down the center aisle, with his pastor, he proudly shook hands with every person sitting next to the aisle.

I would like to suggest that Brandon viscerally (if not intellectually) understood that he is filled with God and immersed in God. Brandon’s lifelong spiritual task then becomes discovering the depths of his own unique identity -- choosing to respond to the world through authentic, compassionate, personal power, rather than unconsciously reacting to the world out of fear and anxiety. He will spend his life discovering what it means to live as the beloved.

I invite you to remember who YOU are -- that you are immersed in God -- and you are beloved. This is the good news. It frees you -- like Brandon -- to play in the waters of grace, to express your own hero within, and to confidently engage others with your authentic self.

We don’t become a child of God at our baptism -- baptism is the ritual which celebrates the truth --- that from our birth and through our death we are immersed in the divine mystery, which is far deeper/richer than we can think or speak. Remember your baptism .... remember who you are .... live as the beloved.