

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent  
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## *“Little Christs”*

**G**ood morning. Welcome to the Fourth Sunday of Advent, which will miraculously change into Christmas Eve later today. This morning we are here for two special ceremonies: the baptism of Luke Matthew Wood, the soon of Matt and Kate Wood, and the baptism of Simon Maxwell Karpinski, the son of Benjamin and Sarah Karpinski. Of course, we all know that Matt and Simon are cousins as Kate and Benjamin are siblings. It's great to have so many people here for these baptisms today.

However, before we start, I need to make a confession. The original plan was to divide the sermons for the four services during the next two days of services antiphonally: Jim would give this morning's sermon, and the sermon at the second service tonight; I would give the sermon at the first service this afternoon, and the sermon tomorrow on Christmas Day. But when I learned that this morning we would baptize Luke Wood and his cousin Simon Karpinski, I asked to give the sermon. I feel as if I have a special attachment to this family: Kate's and Ben's grandfather Win Allen was on the Vestry with me when I was first elected to the Vestry; their mother Kathy was head of the selection committee that hired Dan Appleyard, who became the rector shortly after my family joined St. Luke's; their father Jack was also on the Vestry with me; their brother John was in my Senior High Sunday School class and supported my efforts to make it fun; Kate of course was senior warden just a few years ago and is an active lay minister here; and I have come to know Kate's daughters Lexi and Lilly through the Children's Chapel. I can't think of anywhere other than a church where you could be blessed by four generations of a family, and both I and this parish thank all of you.

The occasion for our gathering this morning is the baptism of Luke and Simon. Even though baptism is the rite of initiation in the Christian church, I wonder how many of us can actually recall our baptisms. When I was in the process to become a deacon I had to provide the date of my baptism, and even though I learned that I was only three years old at the time, I actually have a vague recollection of the event: I recall the blinding white light from heaven and the angelic choirs singing hallelujahs. Luke and Simon might not recall what we do here this morning, but we'll all be there to tell them about it.

And baptism is very important in the life of a Christian. It is one of the two sacraments instituted by the Lord: as recorded near the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew, the risen Jesus commands his disciples to “go into all nations and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Baptism is recorded in the books of the New Testament telling the story of the early church. One of the first times was when the apostle Phillip baptized an Ethiopian (Acts 8:27-40). Paul wrote often of the significance of baptism in his letters to the various churches, but he always took for granted the existence of baptism.

No question, baptism was important in both the practice and theology of the early church. During the early centuries when the church was still being persecuted, becoming a Christian could be dangerous. As a result, baptisms occurred at the end of a lengthy process, which started with a period of “inquiry.” We still have “Inquirers’ Classes” for people interested in joining the church. Following inquiry, the next step was the Catechumenate, during which there was extensive training in the faith and which could last as long as three years. If that’s not enough, the next step was known as the “ordeal,” and usually took place during Holy Week. The whole process ended at the Easter Vigil, when the new Christians were baptized and permitted to remain for Holy Communion for the first time.

And baptism also influenced the theology of the church. The Trinitarian formula from Matthew of baptizing “in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” was included in the early creeds, such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, and became the fundamentals of our faith. The placement of baptismal fonts in church architecture reflects the theology and practice of baptism as well. Here at St. Luke’s we all pass by our baptismal font as we enter the nave to worship, and start all of our processions at the font. This provides a weekly reminder of our baptisms.

You might expect that by the time of the creeds the early church would have settled on a fixed practice of baptism, but it remained a source of controversy. After the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313, and brought the faith out of the shadows, people became so worried about sinning *after* baptism that they delayed being baptized as long as they could. In fact, the Emperor Constantine delayed *his* baptism until he was on his deathbed. Then another controversy involving the worthiness of ministers swept the church in the fourth century: certain groups claimed that the sacraments were not valid unless the *person* administering it was worthy. Fortunately for all of us here today, and *especially* the clergy, the Church decided that sacraments such as baptism are effective because God is acting, rather than due to the merit of the individual minister. Otherwise, who would ever be worthy to baptize? This remains the position of the Episcopal Church, and you can turn to page 873 of your Book of Common Prayer for confirmation.

However, settling the dispute over the worthiness of the ministers did little to dampen the disputes over baptism. The next big argument still affects us today. In the fifth century Pelagius, a British monk, tussled with an African bishop named Augustine over the nature of humanity. Pelagius claimed that humans were inherently good, but Augustine asserted that people were inherently rotten. Augustine won the debate, and a result he gave us the doctrine of original sin, which declares that we are all born in a state of sin passed on by our parents. This led to more infant baptisms in order to “wash away the taint” of original sin. Baptism had started as the glorious culmination of the lengthy process of learning the faith and becoming a Christian, but within five centuries it had become almost a magical rite to purify infants conceived and born in sin.

And don’t think that the Reformation straightened out the problems with baptism. Instead, baptism continued to be debated. Some Reformers even rejected the necessity of baptism since they considered faith alone to be sufficient for salvation. John Calvin, who preached predestination – that some people were destined to heaven while others were created for the fires of hell – asserted that baptism was valid only for those already chosen to go to heaven. And the controversies over baptism

continue to the present day. When I was a hospital chaplain I worked with several Baptists seminarians. They were all great people, but they believed that I was living in sin because I had not been baptized as an adult after making a profession of a personal faith in Jesus Christ as my savior.

There are even controversies over the *method* of baptism. What we'll do later this morning is called affusion, which is pouring water over the heads of Luke and Simon. Another method is called aspersion, which is sprinkling water. Sometimes when we affirm our baptismal vows during a baptism the celebrant will sprinkle water on the congregation with an aspergillum. Another method is immersion, which consists of submerging part of the baptized person under water, and the final method is submersion, which is, of course, dunking.

Even though it was mandated by Jesus and it remains the basic initiation rite of our faith, baptism has remained controversial since the first days of the Church. Yet I believe that none of these disputes are as shocking as what we *actually* do here this morning when Luke and Simon are baptized. Something almost beyond our comprehension is happening. Paul addressed it when he wrote to the Christians in Rome that when we are baptized, we join in Christ's death and are raised with Christ. Luke and Simon die and are raised to new life. This is why in the early Church baptismal fonts were huge: going down under the water symbolized death, and coming up out of that pool represented new life in Christ.

But that's not all. As shocking as it might be to figuratively drown and raise our children through the waters of baptism to demonstrate the death of the old self and the new life in Christ, there is something else which God does through the sacrament of baptism which is so amazing that we almost overlook it. After the affusion, when Father Jim will pour water on the heads of Luke and Simon, he will take oil (also called chrism) which has been blessed by the Bishop, and make a cross on each of their foreheads. When he does this, he will say, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever" (BCP, 308).

When Father Jim marks them with that chrism, what he is doing is *anointing* them. When Luke and Simon are sealed with the chrism on their foreheads, they become "anointed ones." Now, in Hebrew the word for "anointed one" is Messiah. The word for Messiah in Greek is, of course, Christ. When Luke and Simon are anointed, they become – literally – "little Christs." When they are baptized and anointed, Luke and Simon join all of us – the baptized – in the life and ministry of a follower of Jesus. There is no more important or fulfilling task in the world. All of us gathered here this morning, those of us who recall our baptisms, and Luke and Simon, who join us among those marked as Christ's own for ever, carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world. So Kate, Matt, Ben and Sarah, let's go baptize and anoint your children, and God will make little Christs of them. Amen.