One of the finer films from the 1980s is a movie called “Tender Mercies”\. This film tells the story of Mac Sledge, a country-western singing star whose life had dissolved into a fog of alcohol. Divorced from his wife and estranged from his only daughter, Mac staggers through life until one night he collapses on the porch of a small, lonely little motel and gas station out in the middle of nowhere on the Texas prairie.

The motel is run by Rosa Lee, a young widow who is raising her boy, Sonny, and trying to make ends meet. Even though Mac has made a shipwreck of his life, Rosa Lee takes him in, hires him to work for her, and through this new chance at life, transformation comes to Mac. In time he kicks his drinking habit, becomes a kind of father figure to young Sonny, ends up marrying Rosa Lee, and begins to attend the Baptist church in which Rosa Lee is a member of the choir.

In an especially well-done scene, both Mac and Sonny are baptized one Sunday morning. After the pastor dips him into the waters of baptism, Mac
stands back up, blinking and drenched, water dripping down off his head and glistening on his beard. It is a portrait of pure grace.

After the service, Sonny and Mac are sitting outside the motel and Sonny says, “Well, we done it. We got baptized.”

“Yup, we sure did,” Mac replies.
Sonny asks, “You feel any different?”

Mac chuckles and says, “I can’t say I do, not really.”

But those watching this film know better. Mac is different. Deep down on the inside of his heart and soul, Mac is a changed man. Outwardly, however, it’s true: his baptism doesn’t seem to change much, and it certainly didn’t make his life any easier.

In the course of the film Mac manages to have a reconciliation with his estranged daughter, now in her mid-20s, but no sooner does this good thing happen when his daughter is killed in a terrible automobile accident. Near the end of the film, still grieving over his daughter’s death, Mac tells Rosa Lee that he doesn’t understand life. He can’t understand the tender mercies of God that led him to Rosa Lee and to the badly needed transformation his life. And at the same time he can’t understand why his daughter had to die.

We often question why bad things happen in life, but Mac is honest enough to admit to being equally confused by the good things that happened to him. God’s grace in our life can be as every bit as intriguing to us as are the tragedies that come our way.

But for the Christian, one thing makes a difference, as St. Paul so convincingly points out here in his letter to the Colossians: our baptism into Christ makes the difference. By all outward appearances, it would seem that baptism could not possibly make much of a difference in a person’s life. In a world so full of problems, tragedies, evil and fear, how could baptism make a
dent in all that?

But here we see that Paul puts a lot of meaning into baptism. He believed that our baptism is a very powerful moment -- a pivotal moment, really -- in our Christian life. And Paul links baptism to his favorite two-word phrase: “In Christ”.

Actually, Paul talks about this idea of our being “in Christ” in his other writings as well. What does it mean to be “in Christ”? Maybe we have grown accustomed to hearing this phrase and even using it ourselves and maybe we have lost the importance Paul puts on this phrase. One writer suggested that we would be quite surprised if an American came up to us and said they were “in Jefferson” or “in Washington”.

So what in the world does it mean to be “in Christ”? Paul would be quick to point out that it certainly means more than seeing Christ as a role model or as simply a person in whom we have a great interest. It isn’t at all related to our common speech about our hobbies, like “I am into golf” or “I am into playing canasta” or something like that. Being “in Christ” means much more than that.

It’s also more than just placing our hope in Christ. A general, for example, might say to the troops, “I’ve placed all my confidence in you, soldiers!” Or we might say to someone, “I’m putting my trust in you. Don’t let me down!” But Paul is not saying that we have placed just a part of our lives into Jesus’ hands. He is not saying that it’s only our love or our trust or our hope that is now located in Christ. Paul is saying that the entire totality of who we are is located in Christ, and it begins at our baptism. Our baptism moves us from the shadows to a life of substance, “in Christ”.

The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus created a whole new arrangement in the world order, what might be called the “cosmos”. Paul writes in verse 15: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made
a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” In other words, a cosmic spiritual battle was raging, with spiritual powers and authorities fighting for supremacy, and they were totally disarmed and became a public spectacle by the finished work of Christ on the cross.\footnote{5}

It’s a whole new world, as we might say, because of Jesus’ victory over death and the devil, and over sin and guilt. And Paul says that in baptism we get invited into that new world. From now on, those who are “in Christ” have power available for changed living. We have wisdom available so that we can know truth. We have grace available so that we can continually cleanse our lives. And, we have a gospel that we can proclaim as we invite others into this new world, this new life in Christ.

And the way Paul sees it is that our baptism -- our entrance into the Christ life -- our baptism brings all this to us. But as Mac in “Tender Mercies” found out, we live out our baptism in Christ while still remaining in this world. And in this world we find lots of theories and philosophies that attempt to explain what’s going on. But Paul would not have our attention mis-directed to these competing theories and philosophies, he would have us focus on Christ Jesus to explain what’s really going on.

Oh, be careful out there. We are up against a world that is highly skilled at distracting us from the central role Christ plays in our life. The headlines in the newspaper, the news we hear 24 hours a day, the absolute busyness we all get caught up into, the lure of the entertainment and leisure industries, even the passion that politics can stir up in us -- wow! Be careful that all this in your life doesn’t seem more real, or more substantial, or more compelling than what the waters of baptism made possible for you.

Someone suggested that on an average day probably that intriguing female voice inside our iPhones that we know as “Siri” tells us what to do more often than we hear the Holy Spirit leading us along our path in Christ.

In this second chapter of Colossians, Paul, writing under the command
of the Holy Spirit, reminds us of a thought to which we need to return again and again: remember your baptism -- your entrance into the Christian faith -- and be thankful. Remember that initial sacrament of the Christian faith that says no matter what things look like, even in a world not friendly to Christ, it is our baptism into Christ that makes all the difference.

Look at Paul's bold statement in verses 9 and 10: “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity [-- God -- ] lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness.” Paul is saying that in Christ all the fullness of God dwells in bodily form. And then, straightaway, Paul goes on to say that because we are now “in Christ” we ourselves have been given the fullness of Jesus, which means that we share in the fullness of God himself!

But note this: our filling up of God's power does not create in us self-important pride. Actually, the more of God we have in us, the more humble we are, the more encouraged we are by the mission of serving one another in humble love. Our baptism into Christ fills us up but it does not puff us up; it brings us into Christ so that we may serve others in the hope of bringing them into Christ as well.

I pray you have come to faith in Christ. I pray that you have followed Jesus into the waters of baptism. And I pray that you and I will live godly, upright lives of humble obedience to our Lord and Saviour.

Let us pray:
O God, we come to you today thankful that you have invited us into your kingdom. In baptism we put on Christ, so may we live each day in Christ, serving you by serving others. We pray this in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Amen.

+==+==+==+==+==+==+

All Scripture references are from New International

2. Scott Hoezee, in his commentary on this passage from Colossians chapter 2, found at http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-12c/?type=lectionary_epistle#sthash.kzzXow8q.dpuf. The Rev. Scott E. Hoezee is an ordained pastor in the Christian Reformed Church in North America and is Director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan.


4. “Cosmos” is “the world or universe regarded as an orderly, harmonious system”. (dictionary.com)

5. This concept is explored by the Dutch theologian Lewis B. Smedes in his book, Union With Christ. Scholar William B. Evans discusses this on page 251 in his book, Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology, an excerpt of which can be found at https://books.google.com/books?id=7AhMAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA251&dq=smedes%22situational%22&source=bl&ots=smLkRKnX3F&sig=SSh0p-JUzZE9dYk0pHc28cef_dk&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjj5quJqlaJApTUL6EIHDAAYwQ6AEIHDAA#v=onepage&q=smedes%20%22situational%22&f=false. By William B. Evans