

For years, every day on KSTP radio, I'd never miss Paul Harvey's segment "The Rest of the Story." I found myself drawn into the story he was telling which would always end with the revelation of the person of whom interesting facts about their life were told. I even found a book of his on Ebay published in the 70s that I picked up. I guess in part he's a big reason why I tend to incorporate stories in most all of my homilies, trying to link the story to the points of the readings while hopefully the congregation stays awake through it all.

For all the people he profiled though, one rest of the story that I recently learned about was his own. He actually wrote an article in the 70s where he shared how at a moment when he was searching, a moment when he felt he had achieved what he had set out to achieve but was still feeling a bit empty, that he finally found peace in surrendering to God, and in doing so, his life became complete. It was the day of his baptism.

He writes:

In 1971, his baptism took place up a little mountain road in Cave Creek, Arizona. He looks back and thinks that all the experiences in his life had been building up to this one.

First, the Christmas Eve when he was three, a gunman's bullet took the life of his policeman father. To provide an income for his sister and Paul, his mother had apartments built in their house. As soon as Paul was old enough, he too, looked around for ways to earn money.

Radio was just coming into its own; by age nine he was making cigar-box crystal sets which he sold for a dollar. A few years later he took part in a seventh-grade class play presented over Tulsa's KVOO radio station. After that Paul spent every spare minute hanging around that studio.

Finally they put him on the payroll. He was 14 and he did everything from sweeping, to writing commercials, with a little announcing on the side. He kept remembering what one of his teachers had said, "Paul, in this wonderful land of ours, any man willing to stay on his toes can reach for the stars."

Radio became Paul's star. At 17 he did some of everything on a local station in Salina, Kansas; then came jobs in Oklahoma City and St. Louis.

In St. Louis at KXOK radio he met Lynne Cooper, who was doing educational programs. They were married and she was Paul's angel, which is what he called her ever since.

Together they worked hard. By 1945 Paul had his own network news program. By 1968 he was on television and doing a newspaper column as well.

Seemingly, he had achieved everything for which a man could ask. Everything, that is, except for a quiet heart.

Something was missing. There was a vague emptiness in his life; an incompleteness that he could not define.

This emptiness was still with him in March of 1971 when he and Angel were vacationing near Cave Creek, Arizona. They noticed a small church on an isolated hilltop. On impulse one bright Sunday morning they decided to attend a service there.

They drove up the mountain road and as they rounded the last turn, the little steeple pierced an azure sky, and white clapboard siding reflected the morning sun.

Inside were a dozen or so worshipers on wooden folding chairs, a scene reminiscent of ones he had seen many times as a youth.

During those formative years, there was one scripture verse Paul learned that had stayed with him throughout the years: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

Sometimes Paul would get to thinking about that—how wonderful it was. He never made it to the altar in any church, but he liked that promise of "everlasting life." So one night, alone in his room, kneeling at his bed, he offered his life to Christ.

Now, as the upright piano sounded a familiar melody in this unfamiliar little Arizona church, Paul was reminded of his long-ago expression of "belief." He did indeed "believe."

The minister mounted his pulpit. As his eyes swept the congregation, he said, "I see we have visitors here." He paused for a moment, then added, "I don't often talk about baptism, but today I'm going to talk about baptism."

Inside Paul yawned. But then, for some reason, his attention began to focus on the simple eloquence of this country preacher.

He talked about how alone man is without a heavenly Father, how much we needed to surrender our lives to Him to find any real purpose for living.

But, Paul thought, hadn't he done this?

"Now I'm going to assume," continued the minister, "that most of you here this morning have already made this commitment. But the giving of your life to Jesus is just the first step in your life as a Christian.

"There is another step: baptism—the way Jesus experienced it, by immersion in water. This becomes the outward expression of your inward commitment.

“This baptism,” he continued, “through the symbolic burial of your old self and the resurrection of a new one, is your public testimony to your commitment.” He quoted supportive scripture, paused, let it sink in.

“There is no magic in the water,” he added. “One’s immersion is simply an act of obedience, a sign of total submission to God.”

Submission to God, Paul thought. He twisted on his chair, this new understanding discomfiting him. Long years ago he had asked to be saved but had he offered to serve? He began to realize how much of himself he had been holding back.

Paul thought of his prayer time each morning driving to his Chicago studio at 4:30 a.m. Often on the dark, deserted expressway he would seem to hear God’s plan for the day. But by the time he was halfway downtown, he’d be arguing with Him, making exceptions, bending His directions.

Could this be the source of his uneasiness, the inconsistency within himself?

Now the minister was looking over his spectacles at the congregation. “If anyone here agrees with me about the importance of this and wants to be baptized, step up here and join me beside this pulpit.”

Paul found himself on his feet, down the aisle, by his side.

The preacher had said there was nothing magic in the water. Yet as he descended into its depths and rose again, he knew something life-changing had happened. A cleansing inside out.

No longer did there seem to be two uncertain contradictory Paul Harveys—just one immensely happy one. Paul felt a fulfilling surge of the Holy Spirit.

Afterward, he cried like a baby, a kind of release. He remembers looking at Angel and her eyes were shining. She knew well what this meant to him, for she had been blessed with the same experience as a girl.

The evolving joy, Paul reflected, was escalating. He’d find himself praying for guidance and not really meaning it in the past; but after his baptism, he says the difference is in a genuine desire to know what God wants and an eagerness to do as He says.

Sometimes he would see a similar eagerness in the faces of people caught up in trying to find Jesus. He says he can identify with their joyous expressions as they rise up out of the water after their baptisms. And he sees their baptisms as irrefutable evidence the Holy Spirit is everywhere He is invited, changing for good all those He touches.

The change this simple act has made in his life, he says, is so immense as to be indescribable. Since totally yielding to Him through the symbolism of water baptism, his heart can't stop singing.

He's shaken off a lifelong habit of fretting over small things. A thousand little worries and apprehensions have simply evaporated.

Also, perhaps because baptism is such a public act—and because one's dignity gets as drenched as one's body—he's discovered a new unself-consciousness in talking about his beliefs.

On a speaking trip in 1972, he was flying over west Texas into a beautiful sunset.

His heart swelled with joy in his new surrender and he thought how wonderful: If this is no more than what the unbelievers believe, a sort of self-hypnosis, it nevertheless affords an inner peace which passes all understanding. And, if it is what we believers believe, then we have all this—and heaven too!

Some like Paul are baptized as adults, most of us though are baptized as children or infants and might not remember the day like he did. But it's worth thinking about, because through our baptism, we can find that peace that Paul found. For baptism is about surrender, but also about freedom.

Baptism has been called the "door of the spiritual life," as it incorporates us into the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God chooses us. And God loves us. And when we are baptized, we surrender to that love, knowing that this love is what brings us happiness, joy and peace. It gets to a central part of our faith, which is namely that we don't aspire as Christians just to imitate Christ and be nice people and do nice things. These things matter, and are in fact a response to our baptism. But anybody can do nice things for other people. Baptism and indeed our faith are first and foremost about being caught up in this Divine Life of the Father, Son and Spirit, being incorporated into that love, grafted onto Christ and sharing in the divine life. Baptism is a gift God gives to us, and it is free. Note the minister did not ask Paul first who he was, what his story was, had he been a relatively good person. He simply invited him to be baptized. Even in the Catholic Church, if someone seeks baptism we don't ask these kinds of questions either; we instruct them in the faith and then baptize. But it is a gift freely given from our God who is love. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you Jesus will say.

Figuring that out, we can find that peace that Paul found. The problem we face is we are born into what we call original sin. There's a tendency because of human nature to sometimes choose evil, much like some are born with a drug addiction if the mother was addicted, or experience trauma if raised in an abusive household. Only something from the outside such as therapy or the help of medicine could help people in those situations. Baptism does this for us. It's that drawing out from original sin, that being born again that Nicodemus is told must happen. Jesus reaches out, and pulls us out of the dysfunction of sin, and liberates us. The other sacraments flow from baptism too;

Communion reminds us of His love for us always; reconciliation heals us when we sin; confirmation strengthens our baptism through the Holy Spirit; Marriage and Holy Orders are ways we live out our faith as we discern our vocation.

So thinking about our baptism, I'd invite us to do what Paul did, namely to surrender, and respond.

With respect to surrendering, remember our identity as members of the Body of Christ is to be shaped by Christ's words and actions. To quote Pope Francis: "Being Christian is not just obeying orders but means being in Christ, thinking like him, acting like him, loving like him; it means letting him take possession of our life and change it, transform it, and free it from the darkness of evil." We do that by asking for God's guidance; by praying regularly; by thinking of the words of Jesus in the garden, not my will but your will be done; by following God's will even when it's challenging and remembering that there's nothing we have to ever conceal from God, and by asking ourselves what needs to be changed or adjusted, like Paul Harvey did, so that we continue to grow into our identity as children of light and children of God. After his baptism Harvey said he stopped arguing with God, bending the directions He was getting, or looking for loopholes but realized he had to let that all go, and when he did, he found the peace he was looking for.

And with respect to responding, remember that Jesus begins His mission with His baptism. Our lives need to be about commitment; baptism sets us on the right path, but the road to sainthood is a marathon. If baptism sets us on the right path, we regularly make sure we are on that right path by going to confession and Communion. And we make sure we are doing our best at our vocation, remembering through our baptism we are incorporated into the love of the Father, Son and Spirit, but our way of life is a reflection of that in how we love one another and make that love known through the testament of our lives.

Admittedly, it's tempting to end the homily with "now you know the rest of the story." But of course the story of our lives continues to be written. And as we look back on a very special moment in our lives and think of our own baptism, like Paul, may we be people transformed, rejoicing that through no merit of our own, Jesus has called us and loves us more than we can ever imagine. This Jesus, the beloved Son of God, meets us now at the table of the Eucharist, revealing himself to us in the gifts of his Body and his Blood. May our sharing in this holy banquet strengthen our identity in him, as together with Him, we write the rest of the chapters of the story of our lives.