When I was in the process of ordination, people often asked me what I felt were the most enjoyable parts of ministry. I didn’t have to think long about it; weddings and baptisms are such joyous occasions, and it is an honor to be part of these intimate, life-changing events. I always come away feeling blessed, as do all who are present, we hope.

There is a Greek word for special moments like this, “kairos”, which means fulfilled time. A time when it’s God’s time. When time stands still. This time doesn’t register on your wristwatch. It is ordinary time that is filled with rich meaning - a thin place where we can glimpse the holiness of life, miracles, and true beauty. Kairos time shapes and orders the rest of ordinary time.

Many years ago, I was looking through a photo album with my grandfather (the grandfather who always took me to church), and we came to a picture of him that must have been taken before 1920. He had on a dapper suit and hat, unusual for his typical day as a dairy farmer back then. With shaking hands, he removed the snapshot from the album and held it closer. I noticed that his eyes were growing misty and asked him what was so special about this picture. “That was the night I met your grandmother,” he said, “My life was changed forever.”

I am still awestruck thinking that if things had not gone well that night, I would not have been, or Jessica, or now Isabella. There is a long chain of implication that follows from a moment of fulfilled time, things which you cannot now envision because you cannot yet see the doors of opportunity, nor the times of difficulty that await you. But this is the nature of the call to faith.

God calls to each of us in different ways, but as Christians baptism is our yes to God. Yes, we will do our best, we say, to teach her in the ways of faith, and we don’t know what that walk will be like, but we will hold her hand through it all, and God is with us.

Infant baptism lifts up and celebrates the fact that we were beloved before we even knew better. Someone was watching over us, taking care of us, and helping us to find the way before we were remotely aware of it. That is one of the root meanings of grace, that God loves us before we deserve it, before we do anything to merit it, God was for us and with us.

Baptism comes from the core of Christian faith and is grounded in Jewish purification rituals. It is one of our two sacraments, the other being communion. In the earliest days of the church, immersion was the common practice, similar to those Jewish purification rituals. This spring, as Jerry and I walked the ruins of these early churches in Turkey, we could see the baptismal fonts, inlaid in the church floor, in the shape of a cross. One walked down into it as a symbol of death to the old self and regeneration of a new life as they emerged from the water cleansed.

The custom was that adults to be baptized fasted during Holy Week. On Holy Saturday before Easter, they stayed up all night keeping vigil. At dawn, they stepped into baptismal pools, or perhaps rivers, facing west, shrouded in darkness, a dramatic symbol of the darkness they were leaving behind. They were baptized in the nude, and there was rumored to be a spike in attendance that day - for whatever reason. As they rose out of the waters, they greeted the first rays of the new dawn on Easter morning. They were given a white linen gown and then celebrated the Lord’s Supper. In this Supper, however, they used milk and honey instead of the traditional bread and wine, as these are symbols of what awaits in the Promised Land. It was a very dramatic process, usually matching the dramatic change of life of the early converts.
Many religions still hold to these rituals in some form, and we cherish the meaning and rich traditions of our culture of baptism that remind us who we are. All of the gospels relate that Jesus was told at his baptism, “You are my beloved, my precious Son,” and received the Holy Spirit.

This is also what we acknowledge, that we are God’s beloved and God’s gift of the Holy Spirit is for each of us.

Martin Luther used to say to people, particularly people who were facing a difficult situation or morally ambiguous situation, “Remember your baptism.” What would that mean to you? Remember your baptism.

Yes, the experience of the water, but what else? Does it mean to you - remember who you are? Does it call you to think beyond that moment?

When you think, what do I want out of life, do you also think – as a child of God, what does God want out of my life?

We take a lot for granted in our culture sometimes. I read an article this week about a college professor who taught Freshman English. He assigned a 500 word essay with the simple question, “Why did you come to college?” He waded through a pile of responses like, “I hope to meet babes,” and the predictable “I’d like to get a good job,” and “I want to get out of my boring hometown and meet people.” Finally, he had two papers that spoke of what it meant to be human, of dreaming dreams and finding a vision, of what it means to live a fulfilling life by making a contribution to our wider society. One of them concluded saying, “May God help me, and strengthen me mentally, physically, spiritually, so as to become a fruitful citizen, and to help my country and my race.

The professor was impressed and passed the papers back to his class. He then discovered that those two papers were written by the only two students in the class who were not American. One was from Lebanon and the other from Angola. Sometimes, we live so long with so many privileges and freedoms that we take them for granted in a way that people who have suddenly had a new opportunity do not.

Likewise in the spiritual realm. We don’t want to take our privileges for granted. We must remember who we are. We are followers of Jesus and use his life as an example. That we, too, are put on this earth for a purpose - to ease suffering of those around us and to lift up one another in love. The Great Commission calls us to go out into the world and spread the good news, be disciples, and make disciples, baptizing one another in the love and faith. That is our business action plan so to speak.

Fred Craddock tells a story about a man that he met when he was a young pastor, a rather committed non-churchman. The man told young Fred rather bluntly when they first met, “I work hard, I take care of my family and I mind my own business.” He had no need of the church. In other words, leave me alone.

Several years later, the man had quite a change of life and just presented himself one day asking to be baptized, which Fred did. More time passes and one day Fred strikes up a conversation with him about his turnaround.

Fred says, “Remember what you used to say to me all the time back then, that you work hard, that you take care of your family and you mind your own business.”

“Yep” said the guy. “I said that a lot.”

“Do you still say that?” asked Fred.

“Yep,” said the man.

“What is the difference?” asked Fred.

The guy thought for a minute and said, “I didn’t know what my business was back then.”
Friends, remember your baptism. When things are morally compromised and the world around you is cynical and inhumane, remember what your business is. As Christians, we have purposeful lives.

Baptism is not just the isolated event of community and water and spirit and prayer. It is also the ongoing journey of life, the ongoing blessing and promise and the ongoing call to ministry to all of us. We can remember our baptism because it is not just that thing that happened before we could form memories, but it is the grace that continues to this day and beyond. Baptism is the birth of a life of growth. Baptism pledges us to a process of faith throughout life.

It is a union with the Church in every time and place and means that we are related by Spirit with Palestinians, Peruvians, and Pakistanis, as they are struggling with issues of life and faith. Why do we care about something that is happening over there when we have issues right here? Because they are our relatives by baptism. This relationship calls us to engage with our brothers and sisters.

Why do we care about barriers and economic dimensions of other countries? Because we are responsible for them in the family of Christ.

To remember the full nature of our baptism is to re-direct the journey of our life very often. But this re-direction does not just come with challenges. It also comes with courage. For if you remember your baptism, you remember that you are not alone. You remember that the family of faith not only needs from you but prays for you. You remember that once upon a time and still continuing to this moment, God calls you beloved.

You can have the courage to know that whoever you are, you are not here by mistake. You are here for a life of liberation, sacrifice, healing, and joy. You are here as part of God’s family.

As we thank God for blessing us with this precious Isabella today, we also take responsibility - all of us as her family - to take care of God’s creation so that she can tell her children and grandchildren of God’s love and mystery - of time that stands still - and that they too are beloved.

We will take a photo today and put it in an album. And someday she can take it out with shaky hands and maybe with misty eyes tell her granddaughter how this day and you changed her life forever.

Remember your baptism. Remember your baptism. Unify your spirit, your politics, your heart, and God’s amazing strength. Serve this world. Live as witnesses to God’s love. And continue to grow on this journey.

I end with this poem by Henri Nouwen:

The one who created us is waiting for our response to the love that gave us our being.

God not only says: “You are my Beloved.”

God also asks: “Do you love me?”

And offers us countless chances to say “Yes.”