

“Through the Waters”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Baptism of the Lord

In case you haven't figured it out, the theme of the day is *baptism*. The baptism of Jesus, specifically, but also, more broadly, *our* baptisms; the Christian practice of baptism. This is the Sunday in the church calendar in which we commemorate the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, long ago. I confess, I did not fully understand or appreciate the significance of this day earlier in my life, or my ministry; my understanding and appreciation has grown over time. I'm also mindful of the fact that it has been nearly two full years since we have had a baptism in this sanctuary. That's a long time to go without any baptisms; it may be one of the longest spans of time without any baptisms in the whole history of this congregation. It's been quite a while since we've given much thought to baptism, so what I'd like to do today is provide a refresher on the significance of the baptism of Jesus, and then spend some time exploring what happens in *our* lives when we pass through the waters of baptism.

The baptism of Jesus is the first event that is recorded in all four of the Gospels. Matthew and Luke give us the stories of Jesus' birth and infancy; Luke tells us about an incident that took place when Jesus was twelve years old; John gives us the grand tapestry about the Word made flesh. Mark's Gospel skips all that; he begins his story with John in the wilderness, and Jesus coming to him to be baptized. But Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell us about the baptism of Jesus, each in their own way; it is one of a handful of stories that show up in all four Gospels. It is also the first *public* event of significance in the life of Christ. His birth was *very private*. The visits of the shepherds and magi were not witnessed by the common people, nor was his presentation and naming in the temple. His baptism, on the other hand, was *very public*; there were large crowds gathered around John; ordinary folk were standing on the shoreline watching. Matthew records a brief conversation that took place between Jesus and John; John felt that *he* was the one who needed to be baptized by *Jesus*, not the other way around, but Jesus insisted that it was “proper” for John to baptize him, in order to “fulfill all righteousness.” For something significant happened when Jesus was baptized, something that had not happened at any of the other baptisms John had performed. *Two* somethings, in fact, two majestic events that publicly set Jesus apart from the rest of the human race. First: the heavens opened up – Mark says they were “torn apart” – and the Holy Spirit “descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.” All four Gospels record the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus, and that this was something *visible*, something that could be *seen*. God wanted people to *see* Jesus receive the Holy Spirit. John had baptized countless people by this point – dozens, hundreds, maybe even thousands – but up until then, nobody had witnessed a baptism like *this*. John baptized people with *water*. He baptized *Jesus* with water. But *God* baptized Jesus with the *Holy Spirit*. Baptism with *water* is one thing. Baptism with the Holy Spirit ... is something else.

The second majestic event at the baptism of Jesus was the *voice* that came from heaven: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” So record both Mark and Luke. A voice speaking directly to Jesus, telling him clearly, and in no uncertain terms, *exactly* who he is – in case he didn’t know, or needed a reminder. Matthew tells the story slightly differently: the voice says, “*This* is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The voice speaks to the *crowds*, not to Jesus, telling *them*, in no uncertain terms, exactly who Jesus is, for surely they didn’t know. Jesus heard one thing; the crowds heard another; but God is able to say different things to different people at the same time.

This event marks a dramatic sea change in the life of Jesus. We know precious little about his life before this – we know that he was a carpenter in the insignificant village of Nazareth, and he must have had some friends, because he got invited to a wedding soon after this – but that’s about all we know. What was he like as a teenager, what was he like in his 20s, what he enjoyed doing in his free time – we have absolutely no idea. From his baptism forward, virtually *everything* in his life is different. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that immediately after he was baptized, he was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil, ate nothing for forty days, and was ministered to by angels. Then the Holy Spirit led him to Galilee, where he began teaching, healing, and gathering disciples. Whatever his life was like *before* he was baptized, it was dramatically different afterward. His baptism was literally a *life-changing* event. At the moment of his baptism, Jesus was *anointed* by the Holy Spirit of God. That Holy Spirit would be with him all the way to the moment of his death. On the cross, Jesus “breathed his last”; in John’s words, he “bowed his head and gave up his Spirit.”

Seven weeks later, on the day of Pentecost, the same Holy Spirit that had inhabited the life of Christ from the moment of his baptism to the moment of his death would come upon the apostles and disciples. That is the same Holy Spirit that comes upon *us*. We, too, are baptized with the Holy Spirit.

So what happens in baptism? What happens when we pass through the waters, when we are baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Well, quite simply, a lot!

To answer those questions, I turned to our new *Book of Common Worship*. This is a fabulous resource that was published just a few years ago, steeped in prayer, grounded in classic Christian beliefs and teachings, drawing upon the rich tradition of the best of what Christianity has offered the world over its two-thousand year history. The book includes a number of prayers about baptism – prayers directly based on words and phrases in the New Testament. Baptism is complicated, and it can be hard to explain; what I appreciate about these prayers is that they not only give *thanks* for the gift of baptism, but they also articulate what *happens* in baptism, and what that *means* for us as Christians.

The prayers affirm that in baptism “we are buried with Christ in his death.” We descend into the waters of baptism in a manner like Christ’s descent into the grave. “We have been crucified with Christ.” As Christ willingly offered his life on the cross, so too do we willingly offer our lives to Christ. As Christ voluntarily shed his earthly flesh, so too do we voluntarily shed our earthly inclinations and habits and our tendency to sin. From baptism we are “raised to share in his resurrection.” We rise from the waters of baptism a new person, like Christ arose from the tomb. “We have been united with him in resurrection.” Christ’s new life is *our* new life. Through baptism “we were reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit.” As the Holy Spirit descended upon Christ, so too do we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, which empowers us to live as Christ would have us live. “We are dead to sin and alive to Christ.” Sin no longer dominates our lives the way it may have in the past. “Through the gift of our baptism” God offers “the forgiveness of sin” and washes us “clean from all evil.” God gives us a clean slate, no longer

regarding our sins as sin. God has “poured out” divine grace upon us and has claimed us as God’s “beloved people.” God has “embraced us” as God’s own and “made us one in Christ’s body.” God has called us “to a new way of life” in God’s “realm of grace and peace.” God has “chosen us” in grace and “made us heirs” of God’s promise. God has “broken down dividing walls and made us members” of God’s house. God has “claimed our lives in baptism, that we might die to sin and be raised with him to new life.” God offers us “safe passage through the sea, justice rolling down like water, deliverance from sin and death forever.” That is a *lot* of things that God does in and for us in the sacrament of baptism. Every single one of those affirmations is rooted and grounded in the scriptures. There’s nothing new here, nothing faddish or outlandish; this is all straight from the Bible; this is what the Christian church has taught for generations. All this happens when someone passes through the waters of baptism and receives the Holy Spirit. It is one of God’s most magnificent gifts of *grace*.

The problem, though, is that we have this tendency to backslide, falling away from the promise and potential that baptism offers. Jesus didn’t have that problem – but we do. So we need to be constantly looking back to the moment of our baptism – whether we remember that moment or not – to remind us of *what God did* in our lives when we passed through the waters. The idea is that we will pray *daily*. We pray that God will *continue* to endow us with that divine grace and the ongoing guidance and presence of the Holy Spirit. We “pray that all who have passed through the water of baptism may continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.” We pray that “our lives proclaim the good news that we are dead to sin and alive to God.” We ask God to “renew our lives and make us worthy” to enter into God’s “eternal sanctuary.” We ask God to “help us to love and serve” God always and to “love and serve one another.” We pray that God will “continue to nourish and strengthen us in the ways of faith, hope, and love.” We ask that God’s “will be done in our lives and in this world” that God loves. We ask God to “set us free from all that we fear and let us live according to our faith.” We ask God to “build us up” to be God’s “holy temple, a place of peace and welcome for all.” We ask God to “keep us awake and make us ready for the coming” of God’s “glorious realm of righteousness, justice, and peace.” We continually pray that we “be born anew from above so that we may give glory” to God and live as God’s “beloved children.” We ask God to “continue to pour out” the Holy Spirit upon us. We ask God to “empower us to love and serve” God and to live as God’s “faithful people, bearing witness to the good news of Jesus Christ our Lord.” We ask God to “confirm in our hearts the witness that Christ is Savior of the world and our Lord.” We pray that God will “grant that all who are baptized” into Christ’s name “may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior.” We pray that we “never turn away from the world, but reach out in love to rescue the wayward.” We ask God to “keep us faithful” in God’s service, “that we may rejoice to be called children of God.” We ask God to “teach us to love and serve” God and to “reconcile us” to God “and to one another as members of one, living body.” We ask God to “fill us with the joy of resurrection, so that we may be a living sign” of God’s “new heaven and new earth.” In short, we pray and we pray some more, that the work that God began in us in our baptism will continue to play out in our daily lives, bearing fruit for God’s kingdom.

Friends, remember your baptism ... and be thankful. Or if there is anyone hearing me today who has never been baptized ... who has never passed through the waters ... well, come talk to me. We can do something about that! For you, too, are invited to share in this magnificent gift of God’s grace.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ... amen.

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