

## “I Need To Be Baptized...”

Isaiah 42:1-9 • Psalm 29 • Acts 10:34-43 • Matthew 3:13-17

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Baptism of the Lord

The baptism of Jesus is a critical event in his life that is recorded in all four gospels. It takes place shortly prior to the beginning of his earthly ministry. Luke says that he was “about 30 years old.” Most of us were baptized towards the beginning of our lives; Jesus was baptized towards the end of his. But baptism was not an option for Jesus when he was an infant; baptism didn’t exist at that point. The Jews had purification rituals; several laws in the Old Testament specified certain circumstances in which a Jew would need to immerse themselves in water to return to a state of ritual cleanliness, such as if one came in contact with a corpse. But baptism is different from a purification ritual.

To understand baptism, we first have to look at what John the Baptist was doing. In Matthew’s words: “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ... Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.” He is called “John the Baptist” for a reason; he had a large and significant ministry, unprecedented in Judaism, that involved a symbolic washing in the Jordan River, accompanied by the confession of one’s sins. It gave people far and wide an opportunity to commit, re-commit, dedicate, or re-dedicate their life to God.

Jesus was one of the hundreds (or perhaps thousands) of people who came to the Jordan to be baptized by John. We can only speculate on why he wanted to do this. Those who emphasize the humanity of Jesus might say that he came with the same desires and needs that all the other people who were coming to John had, but classical Christian theologians would argue that Jesus did not need purification and did not have any sins to confess. One view is that Jesus needed to place himself on the same level as the rest of humanity, subjecting himself to baptism in humility and obedience. Some link Jesus’ baptism with his redemptive sacrifice on the cross; he begins his ministry with this symbolic washing that was designed to temporarily free people from their sins, and he ends his ministry with a sacrificial death that *permanently* frees people from their sins. That is to say, what the rite of baptism offered individual people, as it was administered by John, was a symbol and a precursor what the death of Christ would offer *all* people, *everywhere*, through the Holy Spirit. Jesus’s baptism was, in this view, a redemptive act that prefigured and ultimately culminated in Jesus’s sacrifice for us and our salvation.

The baptism of Jesus is recorded in all four gospels. It is described in some detail in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and is mentioned in John. Each gospel has its own particularities. Matthew states that Jesus came from Galilee for the express purpose of being baptized by John. Matthew also – alone among the gospels – records this exchange: “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented.” In Matthew’s version, Jesus had to

*persuade* John that it was appropriate to baptize him, for John knew that Jesus was greater than he.

Matthew describes what happens next: “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Mark and Luke record the event in nearly identical words, although in those two gospels the voice from heaven addresses Jesus directly: “*You* are my Son, the Beloved; with *you* I am well pleased.” In Matthew’s version, the voice seems to be speaking not to Jesus, but to everyone around him, making it abundantly clear, in no uncertain terms, that *this* man coming up from the water is none other than the Son of God. But did all the people around Jesus also see the Spirit descend upon him like a dove, or was that visible only to Jesus? Luke implies, and John makes plain, that other people saw the Spirit’s descent; but that’s not so clear in Matthew. I find details like this fascinating, and the fact that the gospels all describe the baptism slightly differently is not, in my opinion, a cause for concern; for we all know that different people can witness the same event and remember it differently. The specific details matter less than the overall meaning and significance. *GOD* has just spoken. The *Holy Spirit* has just descended upon Jesus. This is a major, *breathhtaking* event in his life; it is the first event in his life that *all four gospels* tell us about. From this moment forward, *everything* that Jesus does is done with the full presence of the Holy Spirit in his life. We have no idea whether – prior to this moment – he knew who he really was, but from this moment forward, he *knew*, to the very core of his being, that he was none other than the Beloved Son of Almighty God.

John the Baptist continued baptizing other people after he baptized Jesus. John’s gospel records that Jesus also baptized some people (John 3:22—4:1), although John is quick to point out that “it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized.” (John 4:2) It would appear that Jesus encouraged his disciples to perform a ministry similar to John’s, at least to some extent, during Jesus’ earthly life. But this ministry explodes exponentially after Jesus’s resurrection. The risen Christ instructs the apostles, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19) This commandment from Jesus became the basis for the church’s practice of baptism ever since. It is also why baptism is considered a Sacrament, for baptism is not only a sign and seal of God’s grace, but it was also directly instituted by Christ himself, just like the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The church’s first baptisms took place on the day of Pentecost, when, according to the Book of Acts, three thousand people welcomed the message about Jesus, repented from their sins, were baptized, and received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Those elements have been associated with baptism ever since: welcoming the message about Jesus, repenting from sin, and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the first few centuries of the church most people who were baptized were adults. By about the fourth century candidates for baptism would typically go through a several-week-long period of instruction, accompanied by prayers and other rites, and be baptized on Easter Sunday. At the same time, as more and more of the Roman world became Christian, baptisms were also administered to the children of believers; we have clear records of infant baptism dating back to the second century in some places. Of course, infants do not have any understanding of sin, or any capacity to dedicate their lives to God, which is why the practice we call “Confirmation” developed; the idea is that once children have reached a sufficient degree of maturity, they can claim the faith for themselves, welcoming the message about Jesus, repenting from their sins, and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. In this way, by a public profession of faith, youth or young adults *confirm* the vows their parents made on their behalf at their baptism.

Such has been the practice of the church ever since: baptizing the children of believers,

confirming those children when they are older, and baptizing adults who are new to the faith. But some of the Protestant Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century maintained that there was no biblical justification for the baptism of infants, and some also felt that baptisms performed in other branches of the church were not sufficiently valid. Thus the various “Baptist” branches of the church were born. We can debate the merits of both positions, and I will grant that it’s a bit challenging to defend infant baptism on biblical grounds. We have long held that baptism for children in Christian families is like circumcision in Jewish families. It is more than just a rite of dedication. It establishes our *identity*.

I want to ask you a question: do you know the *date* of your baptism? I’m sure you know when your birthday is. Those of you who are married remember the date of your anniversary. (You do, don’t you?) You probably know your Social Security number. Maybe you know the number on your driver’s license, or on your health insurance card. But do you know the date of your *baptism*? That date when you felt that water on your head that manifested the cleansing waters of salvation? That date when you heard the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit?” I would like to encourage you to consider that that date is probably more important than any of those other dates or numbers. That’s the day you were officially joined to Jesus Christ our Lord.

I will confess, I don’t know that date for me. Nor do I know the date of my confirmation, when I claimed the Christian faith as my own. I have the records; I have certificates from both events. But I don’t know the dates. Perhaps I should. Perhaps those events are worth commemorating every year, the way we celebrate our birthdays and the anniversaries of our weddings and other significant events.

I would like to suggest that it’s worth taking some time every year to remember our baptisms, and/or our confirmations. To give thanks to God for the gift of baptism, and for the working of the Holy Spirit in our life. And to re-commit ourselves to Christ. To re-affirm our baptismal vows.

That is one of the primary purposes of this day in the church calendar, the Baptism of the Lord. For on this date we not only take some time to remember and celebrate the baptism of Jesus; we also take time to remember and celebrate our *own* baptisms, and the gifts and graces we have received from Almighty God through the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We also have an opportunity to re-commit ourselves to Jesus. Conveniently, this Sunday always falls in early January, near the start of the year. It’s a good time to think about what kind of people we want to be this year; about where our allegiance ultimately lies; about who, above all else, we have promised to faithfully serve.

In a minute or two I’m going to invite you to stand, and together we will once again reject sin, and profess our faith in Jesus Christ. Then I’m going to pray, giving thanks for the gift of baptism, and for everything it means for our lives. In our tradition, and in many Christian traditions, baptism is a Sacrament, to be received only once in our lives. But there is no limit on the number of times we can be *reminded* of our baptism. For some people, it helps to do that *tangibly*, using water. So I will then invite any who wish to come forward to the baptismal font. I will sprinkle a little bit of water in your hand, and you may take that water and mark yourself with the sign of the cross on your forehead, if you wish. I will say to you, “remember your baptism and be thankful, and know that the Holy Spirit is at work within you.” You may respond, if you wish, by saying, “Thanks be to God.” We are not baptizing anybody today, nor are we re-baptizing anybody today; instead, what we are doing is *remembering*, to the extent that we can, our baptism or our confirmation or both, and *celebrating*, and *reminding* ourselves of who we are in Christ, through the gift of baptism and the seal of the Holy Spirit. I pray that this annual reminder will help keep you faithful in Christ all through the year.

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