

## “Baptized in the Name of the Lord Jesus”

Genesis 1:1-5 • Psalm 29 • Acts 19:1-7 • Mark 1:4-11

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Baptism of the Lord

Yesterday was Epiphany, which is always on January 6. Epiphany is about the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world, about the fact that Jesus came not just for *Jews* but for the entire *world*. The classic Epiphany story is the coming of the “wise men” from the East; those magi may have been priests or astrologers from the lands we now know as Syria, Iran, or India. They were not Jews, and yet they came to Bethlehem to pay homage to this Jewish child, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew tells us that King Herod attempted to eliminate baby Jesus by killing all the boys in and around Bethlehem two years old and younger. This is called the “Massacre of the Innocents,” and it is commemorated every year a few days after Christmas in numerous branches of the Christian church. Mary and Joseph escaped by fleeing with baby Jesus to Egypt – it’s a good thing that the border was open! – then, after Herod died, they returned to their hometown of Nazareth, in the region of Galilee.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth. We know extremely little about his childhood. Luke tells just one story: his extended family’s visit to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration when Jesus was twelve. They went every year, but that year, Jesus sat in the temple for days, listening to the teachers and answering their questions, “and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.” He gave Mary and Joseph quite a fright when they couldn’t figure out where he was! When they finally found him in the temple, Jesus simply said, “Didn’t you know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

Then there is another long gap in the biblical records – an *eighteen-year* gap. What was Jesus like as a teenager? Or as a young adult? We have no idea! There are some legends, probably originating from at least a century later, that are really “speculative fiction.” What we know from more reliable sources is that Joseph was a carpenter (Matthew tells us that) and that Jesus also became a carpenter (Mark tells us that). It seems to be the case that Joseph died sometime before Jesus turned 30; Joseph never appears after that, and Mary appears to be a widow throughout the rest of the Gospel story.

The next thing we know for certain is that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River when he was about 30 years old by John the Baptist. Versions of that story appear in all four of the Gospels; indeed, it is the *first* event that is reported in *all four*. John was a relative of Jesus, some kind of cousin. John’s father Zechariah was a priest, and belonged to a long line of priests; he served at the great temple in Jerusalem. John was born when his parents were very old, so by the time he grew up, they were probably deceased. John, for some reason that is not fully clear, turned his back on his priestly lineage. He became an itinerant preacher in the desert wilderness east of Jerusalem, calling people to repent of their sins and live a holy life. Large numbers of people flocked to him in the wilderness. There must have been something *remarkably compelling* about his preaching, and it’s quite possible that the religious customs of the Jews had become so ritualized or so irrelevant to people’s daily living that they had become meaningless for vast numbers of people. But John’s message was fresh, appealing, and relevant;

people came to him in droves. John's ministry was so significant that it was also recorded outside the pages of the New Testament, by the Jewish historian Josephus, towards the end of the first century.

John was baptizing people at a place that the Gospel of John calls "Bethany beyond the Jordan," which was probably located about five miles north of the Dead Sea and about four miles east of Jericho, on the east side of the river, in what is now the country of Jordan. Today, this is an extremely popular tourist destination – at least, it is when there's not a war going on – and there are numerous churches here, and the remains of many more. At the time of Jesus and John, there was a small town here.

John seems to have "invented" the concept of baptism for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. There were well-established practices in first-century Judaism for ceremonial washing to restore a person to a state of "ritual purity"; there were specific circumstances in which people had to go to a natural stream or a *mikveh*, a ritual bath, to wash; these included some skin diseases, certain bodily emissions, and exposure to a corpse. Whenever any of those circumstances occurred, there were specific steps a person had to follow, in a specified time frame. But what John was doing with people was dramatically different. He was not restoring people to a state of ritual purity; rather, he was inviting people into the water as a *symbolic representation* of their sincere desire to repent of past sins and live a faithful life. People *voluntarily chose* to enter the water; no priest was telling them they *needed* to. John would invite them into the river, fully immerse them under the surface of the water, and lift them out again, and that immersion symbolized the person's "dying" to an old life and "rising" to a new.

And so a day came when Jesus, at about the age of thirty, left his home and his carpentry in Nazareth and traveled to Bethany beyond the Jordan, to be baptized by his cousin John. Luke tells us that John thought *Jesus* should baptize *him*, not the other way around, but Jesus replied, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." So John consented, and he invited Jesus into the river, just like he invited everyone else; and he lowered Jesus down under the surface of the water, just like he lowered everyone else; and he raised Jesus back up again, just like he raised everyone else – except, when he raised Jesus, *something incredible happened*, that had never happened before and would never happen again. Mark describes it like this: "just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." There are three elements here: (1) the *tearing apart* of the heavens, which seems to imply that something *of God* is breaking into our everyday world; (2) the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, which seems to mark a fundamental change in Jesus's very being – he was already the Son of God and the Word of God incarnate; he had been that since the moment of his conception; but now he is invested with the divine *power* of God; and (3) the voice from heaven, the voice of God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, declaring to Jesus, in no uncertain terms, that he is indeed God's beloved Son and that God joyfully approves of Jesus's *life*, Jesus's *purpose*, and Jesus's *direction*. In Mark and Luke, those words are given directly to Jesus – "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" – while in Matthew's Gospel, those words appear to be heard by everyone around: "*This* is my Son, the Beloved, with *whom* I am well pleased." God wants Jesus to know, and God wants *everyone else* to know, in no uncertain terms, that *this* is God's Son; *this*, in John's words, is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

That voice from heaven will resound again, in almost identical words, later on in the Gospel story: at the Transfiguration, on a mountaintop, when Jesus's appearance changes to a dazzling white, and he is seen speaking with Moses (who was dead) and Elijah (who had gone up to heaven in a whirlwind). Evidently, that message from God needed to be repeated, and Jesus was given an opportunity to talk with the greatest Teacher and the greatest Miracle-Worker of the Jewish people.

But, between this story and that one, John will continue baptizing people, and the Gospel of John says that Jesus himself began baptizing people, at least for a brief period, before he passed that responsibility on to his disciples. The Spirit of God remained upon Jesus until the moment of his death, when he “breathed his last” and the curtain that enclosed the most sacred chamber in the temple was torn in two, the very same way the heavens had been torn apart at the moment of Jesus’s baptism. After his resurrection, when the risen Christ met with his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, he instructed them: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” So, ever since then, the Christian Church has been baptizing people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit has been entering people’s hearts and blessing them with gifts.

Initially, it was just adults who were baptized, but later in the New Testament there are indications that whole households were baptized. Fairly quickly it became a practice in the early church to baptize the children of believers to mark their inclusion in the household of God, in pretty much the same way that Jews circumcise their infant boys to mark their inclusion in God’s covenant. The concept of “believer’s baptism” didn’t really exist until the Anabaptist movement in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during the Protestant Reformation. To this day, all around the world, Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and numerous other branches of the Christian church baptize infants, while those branches that trace their history through the Anabaptists – including all the various forms of the Baptist church that exist today (and there are many!) – hold that a person needs to make a mature profession of faith in Christ prior to baptism. Both positions can be supported by the Bible. Here in the Presbyterian Church we honor any baptism administered in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, so if you were baptized in some other denomination, you don’t need to be re-baptized when you join us. We also affirm that baptism only needs to be administered *once* in a person’s life, for a person who has received the grace of God through the Sacrament of Baptism never loses their status as a beloved child of God, no matter how much that person might wander, stray, or sin over the course of their life.

But we are also fully aware that there are times in a person’s life when one feels led by the Holy Spirit to *renew* their commitment to Jesus Christ in some kind of symbolic way. Thus we provide opportunities for people to *renew* or *reaffirm* their baptismal vows. We’ve been in the habit here of providing that opportunity on this particular Sunday of the church year, when we commemorate the baptism of Jesus, which also conveniently falls on the first or second Sunday of the calendar year, a time when people are often making new commitments and resolutions of various kinds. So, in a few minutes, we are going to reaffirm many of the promises we made when we joined the church as full members, and we’re going to provide you with an opportunity to *feel* the baptismal waters once again. You can participate in this renewal ceremony whether or not you are a member of this particular church, as long as you have received baptism at some point in the past. If you’ve never been baptized, well, consider this a “foretaste” of what you might experience when you feel ready to be baptized!

I want to invite you to enter this time prayerfully and with intention. Do you *sincerely* wish to follow Jesus? A life marked by faithful devotion to our Savior and Lord? Are you ready to let go of all the other little gods and idols that you worship and serve, and place Jesus at the head and center of your life? It doesn’t matter what you’ve done or not done in the past; it doesn’t matter whether you’ve faithfully attended church all your life or if there have been long periods when you have been somewhere else on Sunday mornings; what matters is where your heart is *now, today*. If you want to follow Jesus, or *start* following Jesus, or *re-start* following Jesus, this renewal ceremony is for you.

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