

“That They Might Receive the Holy Spirit”

Isaiah 43:1-7 • Psalm 29 • Acts 8:14-17 • Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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January 12, 2025

Baptism of the Lord

We’ve got three things to talk about today, and they’re all related: first, the baptism of Jesus; second, our own baptisms; and third, this mysterious thing we call “ordination.”

First: the baptism of Jesus. This is one of about ten pivotal moments in the life of Jesus, and it is the first one that is recorded in *all four* of the Gospels. Most of you know this story, but just in case there is anyone out there today who doesn’t know it or needs a refresher, here’s what happens: there was this weird, wild guy named John who was baptizing people in the Jordan River. He was actually a relative of Jesus, maybe a cousin. He was also the son of one of the priests at the temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish people had a long history of washing themselves for ritual purity – restoring someone to a condition of being “clean” in a pretty formal and legalistic sense – but what John was doing was new and different. To the best of our knowledge, nobody had ever done this before. He was out there, near the Jordan River, in the Judean desert wilderness, clothed in camel’s hair, eating locusts and wild honey, telling people to straighten up their lives and live righteously and turn from their sinful ways – which is usually not a message people want to hear – but his preaching was so powerful and so persuasive that people were flocking to him in droves – and when people heard and accepted his message, when they resolved to do exactly what he was telling them to do, to put their sinful ways behind them, he would lead them out into the river, gently lowering them down under the surface of the water, and then bring them up again. They would rise from these waters of baptism to begin a new and different life.

There came a day when Jesus of Nazareth came to John to be baptized. He wasn’t well known yet – at that point most people thought he was simply a carpenter – but soon he would become *very* well known. Matthew’s Gospel says that there was a little conversation between John and Jesus prior to his baptism; John says to Jesus, “*I need to be baptized by you, not the other way around!*” – but Jesus insists: “*Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*” So John consents, and he brings Jesus out into the Jordan River just like he had done with countless other people – but this time, something particularly unusual happens. In Luke’s words: “*the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’*” Nothing like that happened to anyone else John baptized – but, as we all know, Jesus wasn’t exactly a normal person. There’s a *visible* event – whatever was happening in the skies – and there’s a *spiritual* event – the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus – and there’s an *audible* event – the voice from heaven declaring Jesus to be God’s beloved Son. It’s a little unclear how much of that was seen or heard by the bystanders standing on the riverbank; the specific details in the Gospels are not entirely consistent; but what *is* clear is that this marked a significant *beginning* to Jesus’s public ministry. He had performed no wonders, signs, or miracles prior to this moment; he had not taught

anyone; he had never preached to people; all of those events occur *after* this one. Something had prompted Jesus to come to the Jordan River and to John at that particular point in his life, when he was about 30 years old; I'm inclined to think the Holy Spirit had *told* him it was time to go there. Now, from this moment forward, Jesus is *filled* with the Holy Spirit in a way that he had not been before – and would remain filled with the Holy Spirit up until the moment of his death, some two or three years later.

So that's the baptism of Jesus, which we commemorate every year on the Sunday after Epiphany, in early January. But there's also the instructions that Jesus gave his disciples, to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The Christian church has faithfully done this for nearly two thousand years, baptizing millions upon millions of people. Different branches of the Christian church handle this differently; some affirm that people should only be baptized when they are old enough to make a mature confession of faith; others (like ours) hold that baptism is the sign of entry and belonging into the Christian community, the same way that circumcision is the sign of entry and belonging to the Jewish community, and that it reflects the reality that God loves us *long* before we are aware of it or can respond to it. Both positions can be supported from what the Bible says. We consider baptism a sacrament, that is, a particularly special way of receiving the grace of God, one that was mandated by Jesus himself. Our traditional language is that baptism is "a sign and seal of our cleansing, of our grafting into Christ, and of our welcome in the household of God." We also affirm that, in or through or in some way related to our baptism, the Holy Spirit comes upon *us* as well, more-or-less like it came upon Jesus, although with less visual or auditory signs. What this means for us is that the Holy Spirit gives all of us *gifts*, gifts that are intended to be used for the building up of the Christian community. These gifts vary from person to person. Some people have the gift of music; some have the gift of evangelism; some are particularly effective at prayer. Some people have artistic or creative talents; some make really good leaders; some are very good with numbers. The list goes on; if you look at the gifts that are mentioned in several key passages in the New Testament, and then add other gifts that are referred to in other verses, you can come up with a list of about *thirty* different spiritual gifts that God gives people. Typically people have more than one gift, and probably fewer than five; it takes all kinds of different people to make the church work. Sometimes people know *exactly* what their gifts are. Sometimes people *think* they're gifted in some area when they're really *not*, and at other times people have a gift that they haven't yet realized that they have. It's important to be honest with ourselves and to listen to feedback from other people; gifts are discovered in community. Sometimes people discover what their gifts are through a process of trying a variety of different things over time and figuring out what *feels* right. Please don't try to be someone you're not; you might *want* to have a particular gift and not really have it – and *that's okay*; it just means you have other gifts that you may not have yet discovered. Each one of us is unique; each one of us is special. You need to be true to who *you* are. You need to be the uniquely special person God created you to be. When you use your gift or gifts in the church, you are engaged in *ministry*; you are a *minister* in the Church of Jesus Christ. We affirm that *all members of the church are ministers*, because all members have been baptized and have received gifts from the Holy Spirit that can enrich the community of faith.

That brings me to the third topic for today: *ordination*. The word "ordain" literally means to "put in order;" it comes from a Latin word that means "order." It essentially means that we are putting someone in a position where they rightfully belong. Most Christian churches have some sort of formal leadership structure, with people who have been recognized as having gifts particularly suited for certain ministries that are deemed essential for the operations of the church. These positions tend to be

regulated; there's some kind of formal process by which people assume these roles, including – among other things – making vows in a service of worship, before God and in front of other Christians. There also tend to be formal processes whereby ordained people can be disciplined or even *removed* from their positions if they are found to be in serious violation of their vows – like in the case of a pastor or priest who embezzles money or abuses children. The titles for these positions vary somewhat from church to church, because the Bible is not very clear about which specific *duties* go with which *title*, and titles sometimes seem to be used interchangeably. In our tradition, we don't have priests or bishops, but we do have Pastors, Elders, and Deacons. In our current official language, Pastors are considered "Teaching Elders," as their most important ministry is *teaching*, and all the other Elders are called "Ruling Elders," as their most important ministry is *ruling* or *governing* the community of faith. The word "Deacon," on the other hand, means "servant;" a Deacon is someone who *serves* other people, tending to their needs. The church created the office of Deacon in its early years when they realized that there were people within the community of faith who had needs that weren't being met, and the apostles didn't have time or energy to tend to it all, since their primary job was to teach and proclaim the Word of God. That story's in the Bible; you can find it in chapter 6 of the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

Ordination is also typically accompanied by the laying on of hands. There's a long history of laying on of hands in the Bible: the ancient Israelites laid their hands on their first priests (Numbers 8:10); Moses laid his hands on his successor, Joshua (Numbers 27:18); the apostles laid their hands on the first Deacons (Acts 6:6); the council of elders laid their hands on young Timothy (1 Timothy 4:14). The Bible doesn't really *explain* this practice, although sometimes it indicates that *prayer* accompanied that laying on of hands. There's definitely something about human *touch* that matters; there's something more tangible, even *intimate*, about touching someone: a handshake, a hug, a fist bump, a soft caress, holding hands – the list goes on. Touching someone indicates a deeper level of *relationship* than merely being in the presence of that person. Perhaps that's what it is: the sense of *community* that is so incredibly tangible when people are touching you in a caring and uplifting way. I remember clearly the *love* and *support* I felt twenty-two years ago, when I was ordained to the ministry, and people were laying their hands on *me*, while one of my mentors prayed over me. I have that ordination prayer hanging on a wall in my office, a constant reminder to me of that precious moment.

In just a few minutes, we are going to be ordaining and installing new Deacons and Elders for this church community. These are people who have been *elected* by this community of faith; you all have voted that you *trust* these people with these important positions of responsibility. We also are affirming that we believe that God has *called* these people to these positions of leadership for this community at this particular time. We ordain and install Elders and Deacons every year; often we do it more than once a year, as it's often hard to get all of these individuals together on the same Sunday. All of these people will be *installed* to their respective offices, and those who have never served in these positions before will also be *ordained*. In our tradition, once someone is ordained to one of these offices, they *remain* ordained, even after their specific term of service has come to an end. There's a saying: once a Deacon, always a Deacon; once an Elder, always an Elder. And, of course, we're going to *pray* for these people, for it's impossible to lead or serve a church well without a whole lot of prayer!

So now let's get to it ... let's ordain and install these individuals whom God has called to serve.

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