

BY WATER & THE SPIRIT

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 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. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

(Matthew 3:13-17, NRSV)

Last Sunday we talked about the famous story of 12-year-old Jesus in the temple, learning all he could from the rabbis. This week we fast-forward over the next 18 years of Jesus' life—years the Bible skips as well. The next time Jesus appears in the Bible, he is a far cry from the missing child who caused his parents' frantic search. He is 30 years old. And he stands on the shore of the Jordan River humbly asking his cousin John the Baptist to baptize him.

If we had known John the Baptist or "Baptizer" we might have questioned the soundness of this decision. Compared to the religious leaders of his day, John wasn't exactly polished, and his social skills seemed questionable at best. Instead of studying the Torah in the calm of the Temple, he lived out in the wilderness, clothed himself in camel's hair, and snacked on locusts and wild honey. John wasn't afraid to step on toes. He preached with the passion of the prophets, warning people of God's imminent wrath. He chastised his fellow religious leaders with the following searing indictment: "You snakes—who told you that you could escape from the punishment that God is about to send...And don't think you can escape punishment by saying that Abraham is your ancestor. I tell you that God can take these rocks and make descendants for Abraham! The ax is ready to cut down the trees at the roots; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire" (Mt. 3:7-10, GNB). Ouch!

This sort of hard-nosed fire and brimstone preaching is not exactly my cup of tea. I much prefer a "kinder, gentler" approach. But, while the religious establishment thought John a lunatic, the common people responded, coming in droves to be baptized in the muddy Jordan.

John was not the first person to practice religious baptism. For centuries, Jewish people had practiced ceremonial washing or cleansing in obedience with the Mosaic laws of purification (*The New International Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 123). In later years, Gentile converts to Judaism were baptized into the faith. While John's baptism was in line with these Jewish traditions, he put his own spin on it. John emphasized, "An ethical quality that baptism had not had before. His was a moral community of penitent souls seeking personal righteousness" (Ibid.). John stressed repentance from sin and a personal

commitment to worship and obey God. Then and only then could a person escape God's wrath.

And yet, even John knew that his baptism was transitory, that someday a greater person would come to lead the way back to God. John said, "I baptize you with water to show that you have repented, but the one who will come after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. He is much greater than I am; and I am not good enough even to carry his sandals" (Mt. 3:11).

The one who came after him was of course Jesus, and when he showed up to be baptized by John it really threw John for a loop. This man of passionate beliefs knew that Jesus was the chosen Messiah, and blurted out to him, "I ought to be baptized by you...and yet you have come to me." But Jesus told him, "Let it be so...to fulfill all righteousness."

The very fact that Jesus desired to be baptized has long puzzled me. Traditional Christian doctrine asserts that Jesus lived a sinless life. Since he had no sins from which to repent, where was the need for baptism? Scholars offer a variety of explanations. The simplest answer seems to be that Jesus was ready to begin his earthly ministry and his baptism was an inauguration of sorts. United Methodist minister Alex Stevenson notes that like the other people who came to John for baptism, Jesus too was, "leaving his old life behind. And like them, Jesus was being obedient to God. He was surrendering to God's will for his life." With his baptism, Jesus began the messianic era foretold by prophets of old. He started the work that God had sent him to do in the first place.

Up to this point in his life, Jesus had not been a religious teacher. He had not healed anyone or worked other miracles. As far as we know, his had been a normal life that, by his own decision, now took a radical turn. For as John lowered Jesus into the water and brought him back up, suddenly the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended onto Jesus like a dove. Scripture tells us that a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Thus began both an earthly ministry and a new spiritual era, which continues to this day.

Baptism was a hallmark event in the life of Jesus, and is an important event for us as well. All Christian churches practice some form of baptism, from the sprinkled water of a baptismal font to total immersion in a river, from pouring water on an infant's head to adult immersion in an indoor, heated tank. Growing up Baptist, I was not baptized until I was 7 years old. Baptist churches were heavily influenced by the revivalist tradition, and emphasize the need for a personal commitment to Christ prior to baptism. At the other end of the spectrum, Roman Catholics began practicing infant baptism as a means of salvation to wash away original sin. Congregational roots can be traced to the Reformed tradition and John Calvin who stressed the idea of children being a part of the "covenantal relationship...in a Christian household" (*The Dictionary of Bible & Religion*, p. 102).

What does baptism mean in our church? How do the baptisms we practice here in Jesus' name affect us personally? In the Congregational tradition, we understand

baptism to be a three-way covenant between the parents, God, and the church. The church and the parents promise to do their best to raise the children in the Christian faith until they can own the faith and Church membership for themselves at confirmation. At confirmation, young people confirm for themselves the vows their parents made on their behalf, thus fulfilling or confirming the vows.

Baptism formally receives children into the love and care of the church. It is an act of public thanksgiving to God for the miracle and mystery of the infant's new life. It is an act of dedication when the parents dedicate their child and themselves to God and God's service. It is an act of consecration where the parents acknowledge that the child is a gift from God ultimately to be used for God's good purpose. It is a promise from the members of our church and the universal church, to love and guide the child in the Christian faith.

As we are nurtured in our Christian pilgrimage we, like Jesus, face watershed moments of faith—moments that hopefully move us to higher levels of worship and service. The biggies such as baptism, confirmation, and church membership ought to be faith-filled moments. But so should the unheralded moments in our daily lives—the decision to help the hurricane victim, the decision to spend time with our children and spouse, the decision to spend time with God in meditation. These too are faith-filled moments—moments when we realize we have a choice to decide to say yes to God. As former Princeton Seminary professor J. L. Hromadka commented, “Faith is not an acceptance of general abstract truths, but an answer and a decision at a certain time and in a very certain place” (*Christian Quotation of the Day* website). Surely Jesus' baptism was a faith-filled moment. We know this because his life was never the same. He spent the next three years teaching, healing, and loving all who crossed his path.

As baptized believers, we too are called to a life of love. This call may seem beyond our reach, but we must never forget that we are not engaged in this process alone. As John the Baptist prophesied, the one who came after him, the one we confess as Jesus the Messiah, has done more than encourage us to be baptized with water. We have been baptized with God's Holy Spirit who dwells within our hearts and minds as an eternal reservoir of strength, wisdom, and compassion. As the Spirit descended from Heaven at Jesus' baptism, so the Spirit of God can fill us with vision and power to transform our world and our lives.

Was your baptism a bit less dramatic than that of Jesus? You probably don't remember one way or the other, but odds are that the heavens didn't open with a dove or a voice like James Earl Jones'. Nevertheless, something holy happened: grace. That's why we call it a sacrament. A sacrament is an outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace. And whether we were baptized as babies, teenagers, or adults matters not. For in baptism, God's presence is affirmed, God's blessing is applied, and God's approval is assured. And now, may we live our lives full of faith in Christ and service to others. May we live our lives as beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we ask you to bless those whom we love. Bless our families, and help us to live together in harmony. Bless our friends, and help us to support them through difficult times. Bless those whom we love, and help us to always be true, faithful, and loyal to them. Bless those who are ill and in pain, sad and in loneliness, impoverished and in need, worried and in distress, discouraged and in despair, tempted and in danger. Give them the grace they need.

Thank you, O God, for giving us life and breath, for giving us homes and churches, for giving us new chances and new creation, for giving us the Spirit and Jesus through whom we pray. AMEN.

Portions of this prayer were adapted from William Barclay, *A Barclay Prayer Book*, pp. 274-275.