

The Baptism of Jesus

Acts 10:34-38 ³⁴ Peter said, "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. ³⁵ Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all! ³⁷ You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached. ³⁸ You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him.

Matthew 3: 13-17 ¹³ At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. ¹⁴ John tried to stop him and said, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?" ¹⁵ Jesus answered, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness." So John agreed to baptize Jesus. ¹⁶ When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. ¹⁷ A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

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Today is the Sunday that is designated every year as Baptism of Christ Sunday. It isn't meant to be an anniversary date like Easter. It's simply a time set aside to think about, commemorate, and celebrate the baptism of Jesus. I've never paid a lot of attention to it because it wasn't an event that seemed significant to me. But during Advent, in one of the adult classes, I was struck by an odd fact. The birth of Jesus is only found in Matthew and Luke's gospels. The baptism of Jesus is found in all four gospels.

I know, and you probably know, as well, that we don't really know the date of the birth of Jesus. To some extent, the celebration of Christmas came about to pre-empt the pagan celebration of the winter solstice. Despite all of that, we spend a lot of time and energy celebrating the season of Advent and Christmas. Here at First Pres, we decorate two trees, hang a huge star, spread candles around the sanctuary, and sing special hymns that we love. We devote a lot of time and emotional energy to the celebration of a birthday found in Matthew and Luke.

On the other hand, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all speak of the baptism of Jesus. It hit me that perhaps, just perhaps, this event was as significant, or more significant, than a birthday. Everybody has a day of birth; not everybody is baptized. So I figured I'd better take a closer look at this and report back about what I learned.

Each of the gospel writers tells the story of the baptism of Jesus in a different way. That's not too unusual. All four gospels tell the story of the resurrection differently. Matthew and Luke tell the story of the nativity in different ways. So, while we'll take note of some of the details that appear in only one or two gospels, we'll try not to get lost in details and overlook the major point of this event.

John the Baptizer and Jesus are so very different from each other. John eats locusts and wild honey – food that you can forage for. It's the sort of thing you might eat if you live off the land out in the wilderness. Locusts don't sound particularly appetizing, and gathering wild honey sounds like it might be a painful process, since wild honey comes from wild bees. On the other hand, Jesus sometimes eats with rich folks. Sometimes he has picnics with friends and admirers on a hillside or on the lakeshore. People call him a glutton and a drunkard.

John wore clothes made from camel's hair and a leather belt. The picture you get is of a rough sort of wilderness character – sort of a Jewish Jeremiah Johnson mountain man. Jesus, we're told, wore layers of garments, including a seamless tunic.

John was a prophet who shouted about angry divine judgment that was coming any day now, a terrible judgment when God would cut down sinners like someone taking an axe to a tree, and the riff-raff would be tossed into an unquenchable fire. He preached condemnation, calling religious leaders a bunch of snakes and taunted them with insults and the promise of God's wrath.

John stood on the east bank of the Jordan River and people came from miles around to hear him, to confess their sinfulness, and to be baptized. Joining the crowd was Jesus. There was no special ritual for Jesus, no private ceremony. He simply followed the others into the water to be baptized. Matthew is the only place where we read about a conversation between John and Jesus. John says that he needs to be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around, but Jesus insists.

John baptizes Jesus and then, to coin a phrase, all heaven breaks loose! The heavens are torn open, the Spirit of God descends like a dove, and a voice proclaims, "This is my Son whom I love and with whom I am well pleased."

Let's take a quick look at a few details. John is so different from Jesus. He almost seems like a wild man, full of in-your-face confrontation, but when Jesus steps up to him, John becomes humble: "You should be baptizing me, not me, you." But Jesus persists, saying that it's necessary to "fulfill all righteousness."

"Fulfill all righteousness" is an odd phrase. You may recall the discussion last week that righteousness isn't limited to how often you attend worship or wish someone "Have a blessed day." Righteousness is vastly concerned with caring for those in need, those who are suffering, those who are the outcasts and fallen. Here at the inaugural event of Jesus' ministry, Jesus is doing what he does throughout his ministry. He is Emanuel, he is God-with-us. Just as he will hang out with trollops and tax collectors, women as well as men, day laborers as well as rich Pharisees, here, Jesus is with these folks who know that they've fallen short of good behavior and they've come to admit it, change their ways, and be baptized. Jesus is right there with them. Jesus' baptism is a symbol of his total involvement in the human condition. Unlike John, who expected the people to come to him, Jesus went to where the sinners were.

The heavens open and a voice declares that God is pleased with Jesus. The Spirit of God descends as a dove and rests on him. The dove is often a symbol of gentleness, beauty, and purity. This moment of anointing by the Holy Spirit doesn't involve any quaking, shaking, or falling out in a dead faint. There's no shouting, groaning, or fit of ecstasy, no thunder, whirlwind, or lightning. When we see a preacher shouting, an evangelist condemning people for their sinful ways, when we see someone who is acting in the same style as John the Baptist, we often say that they are filled with the Spirit.

But it seems to me that one point of the story of Jesus' baptism is that there's more inspiration of the Holy Spirit in gentle acts of kindness than in fiery words of condemnation. John condemned the people who stood before him. Jesus, however, refused to condemn the adulteress who was brought before him. John waited for people to come to the Jordan. Jesus went to where there were those who needed him. John yelled about unquenchable fire. Jesus spoke of love and compassion. John threatened that God would come to judge and punish. Jesus said the kingdom of God is near, in fact, it is within you. Love each other as I have loved you.

Perhaps there are some people who only begin to think about their life and their God when they hear a voice like that of John the Baptist. But the ministry of Jesus shows us that God would have us fear not, and would have us respond to the love of Christ with love for others.

This story shows us that baptism is a mark of repentance, repentance in the real meaning of the word. Repentance doesn't mean regret. It isn't about saying, "I'm sorry." Repent simply means to change direction. Surely, many of the people who came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John

changed the direction of their lives, and their baptism was the symbol and mark of that change. Jesus's baptism is the beginning of his public ministry. It marks his repentance – not the regret and shame of his previous behavior – but the change in direction of his daily life, from carpenter to itinerant rabbi. **We** should see baptism in a similar way. We tend to think of baptism as the end of a process. “I'm baptized. Now, I'm a Christian. That's done and taken care of.” But baptism isn't some sort of final act of faith. It isn't a punched ticket to ride the train to glory land. Instead, it is the mark, the symbol, that we are embarked on a journey. We are on the path of faith. We have a life of ministry before us. We need to remember that we are baptized, not to be reassured that we are members of some fraternal organization that provides eternal fire insurance. No, we need to remember that we are baptized and take note of any repentance, any course correction, that is needed.

Think about the voice saying, “You are my child, whom I love, and who pleases me.” How must that have made Jesus feel? How that must have given him confidence and strength! It must have filled him with determination to stay focused on God's desires. And the blessing of God's Spirit wasn't just a wonderful spirituality for Jesus' private inner peace. No, he shared the love. He freely spread love and compassion to saints and sinners alike, showing God's love for them in words and deeds. So, know how very much you are loved by God. But don't hold onto it. Give it away to others, to friends and enemies alike. It comes with a lifetime guarantee: The more you give love, the more you will have. There's the miracle we can all experience. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

Baptism is the beginning of a life of ministry.

Repent, change direction as needed to stay on the path of Christ.

Let the Spirit whisper God's love in your ear
so you may tell others of that love through your words and actions.