

BPT.A

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 13, 2008

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

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¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Our four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all start their stories of the life of Jesus in different ways. John begins by speaking in symbols of "the Word" and "lightness and darkness". John's whole Christmas story is given in one verse: "the word became flesh".

Matthew is more interested in history. He tells of a confused Joseph and wise men coming with Herod breathing down their necks and an escape to Egypt. Luke brings a more humble slant to the story. Luke tells about the stable and the shepherds. Mark doesn't bother with a birth story at all.

All four Gospel writers have their own ways of dealing with the earliest part of Jesus' life and what they think is most important about it. ...But all four come from their diversity and focus on the beginning of Jesus' ministry with the same story. It is not Jesus' birth. It is Jesus' baptism.

Once we get past the story of Jesus' birth there is no more a matter of what one writer thinks is important and another writer chooses to emphasize. All of the Gospel writers agree on the importance of where Jesus' ministry began: on the banks of the Jordan River with John the Baptist.

We don't always like the story of Jesus' baptism because it can be confusing. We think of baptism as a sacrament for the forgiveness of sins. So why is Jesus being baptized? Jesus

was the one person in history who was not sinful. Surely Jesus had no need to repent. John the Baptist was confused, too. He told Jesus there was some mistake.

"I ought to be baptized by you" John said, "and you have come to me!"

As long as we see baptism as only a remedy for sin, this important focus on the start of Jesus' ministry will be confusing. More than confusing, it's an embarrassment. As forgiveness of sin, Jesus' baptism is an embarrassment. And if baptism is only for forgiveness of sin, then Jesus' baptism is only an embarrassment. Jesus has done nothing that needs forgiveness. Our hope in Jesus' role as God in the world depends on him being sinless. What is he doing being forgiven?

We as a church have tried to conjure up explanations over the centuries. We have tried to say that Jesus is just giving us an example to follow. He's showing us how he would act if he were sinful, like we are. He's showing us what we ought to do. He's not doing anything important for himself.

Well, God the Father seemed to think it was important for Jesus himself. Our scripture records the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended, the voice of God identified Jesus as his own dear son...It was pretty spectacular. There is a good deal more here than Jesus telling us how to do something that doesn't apply to him. This is more than an illustrated lecture on how to be baptized - if you are sinful.

There is more to baptism than the forgiveness of sin. Baptism does more than take away that which is evil. It brings in that which is good. It is the initial sacrament that marks a relationship with God. ...And even Jesus Christ himself was baptized by God. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry he is marked by God. He is empowered by the Holy Spirit and identified as God's own son.

And so, with our baptism. We don't baptize to wash away all of the sins we've committed up to that point. If we did that we would wait until a child is older so we could take care of more sins. And then we would re-baptize from time to time to wipe the slate clean again. But we

don't do that. *Because baptism is not based on our sinfulness.* Baptism is based on God's righteousness. The purpose of Baptism is to mark you as a child of God. Baptism is to empower your life with the Holy Spirit, to direct you as you begin your ministry.

Our understanding of the sacrament of Baptism calls for us to baptize all people. This also causes some confusion. We baptize infants who cannot make a commitment of faith. We baptize people who are mentally handicapped who cannot make a commitment of faith. We baptize people who are very sick and will probably not live to fulfill their commitments as baptized Christians. And, I have heard these practices dismissed as "cheap" baptism. The thinking is that this is baptism without first requiring faith and commitment to God's word.

I think that's right, incidentally; our faith is not first required for baptism, because baptism is not something we do. Baptism is what God does.

An infant does not have enough understanding and faith to deserve baptism, a little child does not deserve to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. I know that I don't have enough understanding to deserve baptism either. And the Gospel lesson this morning tells us that Jesus Christ, himself, was the object of the Holy Spirit and the favor of God. ...Not something that Jesus took with his power and virtue. It was something given to him.

Baptism that comes strictly from God is not cheap baptism. It is costly indeed. The cost is not what you do. The cost is what God has done for you. Unearned and unworthy...you are baptized.

The value of baptism is great because it comes only from God. A baptism based on my belief; a baptism based on the faith I already have wouldn't be worth much. A baptism that required my limited strength and my narrow vision, that would be cheap baptism. But baptism doesn't depend upon me. Baptism comes from God.

This message of God's wonderful grace is not an attempt to say the life given to us in baptism is easy. It is only to say that the life given to us in baptism is undeserved.

Baptism in the New Testament is always spoken of in terms of repentance. Even in the case of Jesus' baptism it would not be wrong to think of Jesus' repentance...not repentance as turning away from past sins. But repentance as turning toward a ministry for God, empowered by the Holy Spirit that came to him at baptism.

In the same way, we must repent daily. Daily we must turn toward a ministry for God. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we must abandon ourselves to God's power, God's direction, God's judgement. We must abandon ourselves to God's will. We must say "God, do whatever you want with me. Whatever your judgement is for my sin, whatever your will is for my life, tell me. Empower me with your Holy Spirit so I can live out my baptism for you."

Are we prepared to ask God to judge us? Are we really ready to ask God what he wants us to do with our lives? If we had to wait until we were ready and confident in asking God to judge us before we could be baptized...if we waited for the "right" faith...we would never be baptized. But it works the other way around. Because God comes to us at baptism - because God makes us his own...now we can have confidence and freedom to ask God for his judgement. Because we know that his judgement is forgiveness. We know he has chosen to love us. We can ask God to tell us his will for us, because his Holy Spirit enables us to follow him in discipleship.

Being baptized by the unearned grace of God does not promise you an easy life. It does not take away the need for commitment. Instead you are constantly being called back to the covenant which God made with you at your baptism. This is no flimsy covenant which you make on your own. This is an ironclad, indelible mark placed on you by God himself. The commitment is not taken away when you are baptized by God. It is made real and unchanging. And you are constantly called to live your life as a baptized Christian.

I urge you to remind yourself of your baptism. God has chosen you and that is the first fact of your life. It empowers everything you do. Just as it is the first fact of Jesus' ministry, it is the first fact of your ministry.

Have you ever noticed that we begin our worship service with the sign of the cross? That is a reminder of our baptism. We make the same cross which was marked on you when you were baptized.

Remind yourself of who you are. Remember your baptism. Remember where you came from. Your commitment, your response is great because of what God has done for you. The Holy Spirit has come into your life. He's not there just to get rid of your past sins. He's there to empower your future discipleship. He is there to continue your growth. To fire your imagination. To show you possibilities you have never dreamed of before.

The same Holy Spirit that empowered the ministry of Jesus Christ...lives in you. It came to you at your baptism.

Abandon yourself to that spirit and continue the ministry of Christ. The ministry that began with the baptism of our Lord and that he wants to continue in you.