

Sermon, January 16, 2022

Matthew 3:1-17

“The Baptism of Jesus”

John the Baptist is standing in the Jordan River calling people to come and receive the baptism of repentance, but he is somewhat taken aback when he finds Jesus standing before him. Knowing Jesus, he wonders why he would be in need of repentance, and he suggests that Jesus should be baptizing him instead. If we are to accept the idea of Jesus' being blameless then we can understand John's perplexity. So why would Jesus go to John to be baptized? We can never be sure, but there are those who suggest that it signifies Jesus' solidarity with sinners - that he stood with the people he had come to serve.

Throughout his ministry he would be frequently criticized for just that - for fraternizing with tax collectors, prostitutes, and drunks. But Jesus did not come to judge or condemn, but to save. When the Pharisees chastised him for associating with such people, he replied, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” But his calls to repentance did not come in the form of judgement, but expressed through mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

But John, himself, had stated that the baptism that Jesus would bring would be different. He said, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”. In other words, the baptism of Jesus is intended to lift up and empower.

The type of baptism that we do usually referred to as “believers baptism” , for those old enough to understand what is taking place, does have the element of repentance. The water symbolically washes away the sin, when in fact that is achieved through the grace of God. It can also be seen as an affirmation of one's belief and commitment to be a part of the Body of Christ. And it also represents an anointing by the Holy Spirit, i.e., empowerment for service.

Of course, that is not the case with Ruby. She is too young to understand what just took place. For her it was just a strange old man pouring water on her head. This is what we call “infant baptism”, in which she is initiated into the Body, which, hopefully, she will affirm by confirmation when she is older and understands what her baptism symbolized. In the meantime, we offer her our support, hold her in our prayers, and embrace her as our little sister in Christ.

As you are probably aware, in Roman Catholic Churches there is a receptacle usually near the entrance to the sanctuary holding water, and as members enter, they will dip their hand in the water, touch it to their forehead, and make the sign of the cross. Why? It is a reminder of their baptism. We don't have such a practice, but it is important that we do remember our baptism, or the fact that we were, if we were too young at the time to remember. It reminds us of the forgiveness we bear through the love and grace of God, it affirms our place in the Body of Christ with all the commitment and responsibility that entails.

Now, you may have noticed that I preached today's and last week's sermons out of order. In the gospels Jesus' baptism comes before the Spirit leads him into the wilderness - but I wanted Ruby's baptism to coincide with Jesus' baptism. It is important that we see the correct order, because the Holy Spirit that comes down in the image of a dove is to understand as Jesus. Being empowered, not only for his time in the desert, but for his ongoing ministry. When we are

baptized, we too are empowered for service unto God. Some churches see the baptism by water and the baptism in the Holy Spirit as two different events. We, however, see them both happening at the same time.

The image of the dove has its origin in the story of Noah, when a dove appears with an olive branch in its mouth, signaling land. The image of the dove with an olive branch has become seen as a symbol of peace, and early Christians began to see it as such. It would eventually be affirmed by Augustine in the 5th century. However, it was seen not as symbolic of peace within civil society, but peace within the soul of the individual.

One other thing I will share with you. A colleague of mine once served in Africa and said that in some African churches the minister fully submerges the person being baptized, and as he does, he says, "I kill you in the name of Jesus". Then, as the person is lifted from the water the minister says, "I lift you up in the name of Jesus Christ". This, of course, symbolizes the death of the old person, and the rebirth of the new. As Paul says, the person becomes a new creation.

And, so, baptism has more than one meaning. It symbolizes the forgiveness of sin, the rebirth of the baptized one, peace of spirit, and empowerment for service to God in the name of Jesus Christ. Remember all of those when you contemplate your own baptism. Amen.

**Let us pray:** God, event loving and kind. We thank you for the gift of baptism and ask that you help us remember our own baptism and the commitments it calls us to. We are grateful that in your mercy you forgive us of our sinfulness, and rebirth us to new life. We also ask your blessings upon Ruby, our new sister in Christ.

Today we also thank you for the life and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. , which the nation celebrates tomorrow. We celebrate not only the life of the man, but all that he stood for - human rights, including racial equality. For the struggle for peace, the cessation of wars, and the doing away with nuclear weaponry, and for an end of poverty in this nation and beyond. May our baptism empower us as well to advocate for all such things. Amen.