

January 10, 2021

Baptism of the Lord (White)

First Sunday after the Epiphany

Genesis 1:1-5

Mark 1:4-11

Sermon title: God Speaks

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, God spoke. We don't know if this means he was immersed completely and this occurred when he was emerging from being dunked, or if this occurred when he was walking out of the river onto the bank. It doesn't matter. God spoke his words of approval over this act of baptism of his Son. "You are my Son, (Psalm 2:7) whom I love (Isaiah 42:1); with you I am well pleased." (Greek tense is timeless - past, present, future. "I am" - always has been, always will be.) These words reveal important characteristics of the triune God: Omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent

God's words link the past (Time before Christ) with the future (time after Christ)

We might ask why Jesus had to be baptized. In Matthew's gospel account, John opined that he was not qualified to baptize Jesus, that Jesus should baptize him. Jesus insisted, so John baptized him.

I will give you four reasons for the baptism of Jesus:

1. Jesus replied to John in Matthew: "to fulfill all righteousness"; The baptism of Jesus is an outward expression that he was consecrated to God, and officially (visually and audibly)

approved by the Father and the Spirit. Commissioned by the Father and equipped by the Holy Spirit.

2. John (the final prophet of the OT line) publicly announced for the world the presence of the long awaited and prophesied Messiah and the beginning of his ministry. John preached repentance to receive forgiveness yet to come (represented in blood sacrifices of OT). Jesus provides all forgiveness through the final, true blood sacrifice. We are called to repent (acknowledge our sin and turn away from it) to receive this forgiveness. Forgiveness has already been established through his death on the cross. We are required to believe in Jesus, then repent. Forgiveness comes before repentance.
3. Jesus identified with the failure of sinful humanity separated from God (even though he was without sin), so he could become our substitute (propitiation) as the final sacrifice. He did not need to repent or be cleansed or forgiven for sin. 2 Cor 5:21 "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This is part of the dual nature of Jesus - fully God and fully man. Emptied of his deity, and without sin as a human.
4. His baptism was an example for his followers, including us. Jesus was baptized to identify with us, therefore we should be baptized to identify with him. In addition, Jesus in the Great Commission sent disciples out to baptize. Matthew 28:19 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." Baptism (like Communion) is an outward expression/sign of an inward working of the Holy Spirit.

What is baptism? As Christians, we associate baptism with water - sprinkling, dipping, immersion. In our UM denomination, any use of water is acceptable.

I was a freshman in college at IUP and joined the Cross Country team. Many of our practices were runs of 4-10 miles on the roads around Indiana. We usually ran in groups up to 7 or 8 together, underclassmen with upperclassmen to learn the routes. On one of these runs during the first few weeks, the group I was in took a route past the ponds at McCreary Tire. We were running in the grass along the edge of a pond when a couple of upperclassmen looked at each other, then started pushing freshmen into the pond. I saw what was happening and managed to elude capture and dunking. It turns out, this was a form of initiation into the cross country team for freshmen. As I look at it now, it was a baptism into the membership on the team. I never underwent the initiation, but was still accepted as a member of the team.

Baptism can loosely be considered an initiation into the church, the body of Christ on earth. During the first couple hundred years of the church (before any denominations divided the church), baptism was required for full membership in the church and admission to the communion table. Before a potential member could be baptized, they (he or she) had to go through a year of preparation. This preparation involved learning scripture, Christian beliefs, spiritual development, and repentance from sin. The baptism rite was a culmination of the preparation and a sign of the person's rebirth in Christ and the church's acceptance of the person as a member of the body of Christ.

Since the beginning of Methodism back in the 18th Century, baptism has been considered one of two sacraments within the church. The other being Holy Communion. We consider these rites to be sacraments because they are an outward expression of an inward working of the Holy Spirit. We call on the Holy Spirit to bless the water of baptism and those who receive it.

The exact words used in the UM Baptismal Covenant are:

“Pour out your Holy Spirit, to bless this gift of water and those who receive it, to wash away their sin and clothe them in righteousness throughout their lives, that dying and being raised in Christ, they may share in his final victory.” The Holy Spirit is an essential part of the rite. It connects us to God the Father and Jesus the Son, just as when Jesus was baptized. All three parts of the Holy Trinity were present - the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a descending dove, God the Father spoke, and Jesus the Son was baptized,

Please note in that statement from our liturgy that the person being baptized is connected to Jesus in life and death. In baptism we are united with the death and resurrection of Jesus as we become a new person, dying to self, born into new life in Christ.

We recall this again in the liturgy used at funerals:

“Dying, Christ destroyed our death.

Rising, Christ restored our life.

Christ will come again in glory.

As in baptism (JOHN) put on Christ,

so in Christ may (JOHN) be clothed with glory.”

Keep in mind, water baptism does not guarantee salvation and a place in heaven. Baptism does not free a person from the penalty of sin.

The person must choose to believe in Jesus Christ and accept the gift of salvation at some point which could be before or after water baptism. The person must at some point be filled with the Holy Spirit which is referred to as being baptized in the Spirit. Again, this can occur before or after water baptism.

Baptism is a covenant process. That's why our hymnal titles the baptism liturgy as the “Baptismal Covenant”. That means there are two parties involved in making a covenant. The second party is the body of Christ, the church, represented by the congregation. That is

why baptism is not a private ceremony. It is to be performed as part of worship, in fellowship with the congregation. The fellowship of baptism seals the covenant.

This is a part of baptism that is often forgotten. We watch a baptism, follow the liturgy, congratulate the person or parents, take pictures, and maybe share a cake. We don't always keep our end of the covenant. Then we complain when we never see the person or family again. We place fulfillment of the covenant fully on their shoulders.

Lets listen to the congregational responses again:

After the person has received the water and words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," the congregation is prompted to welcome the person with the following response:

"Through baptism you are incorporated by the Holy Spirit into God's new Creation and made to share in Christ's royal priesthood. We are all one in Christ Jesus. With joy and thanksgiving we welcome you as members of the family of Christ."

Do you hear the responsibility of the congregation in these words of welcome? We represent the church universal as guardians of the Holy Spirit. We invite the person to share in Christ's royal priesthood, a position which each of you who are baptized already hold. You are part of Christ's royal priesthood, which has an obligation of faithfulness and discipleship. You are welcoming the person into the family - to be one of us. Not an outsider looking in, but one of our own.

If the person is joining the church the pastor prompts the person to respond to words of commitment to the church, then the congregation is prompted to commit to love and care for the person and, "Do all in your power to increase their faith, confirm their hope, and perfect them

in love.” As a congregation, we make a covenant before God to actively disciple this person. Praying is part of the covenant, but listen to the action verbs: *increase* their faith, *confirm* their hope, *perfect* them in love. We have work to do.

In infant baptism, the congregational covenant is stated this way: “With God’s help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ.

We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their service to others.

We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.”

Yes, we hope the parents will continue to bring the child to church, but what if they don’t? We still have a covenant to keep. Think back in your own life. How have others (in this congregation or another) kept their baptismal covenant to you? How have you, the church, kept your baptismal covenant with those around you?

I stress these congregational covenants to emphasize that baptism is not simply a personal decision. It requires fellowship. That is why in the UMC we always perform baptisms in the presence of a faith-professing congregation, except in unusual circumstances.

The modern church often uses the season of Lent as a time of preparation for those who wish to be baptized or received into church membership. Another important point in the United Methodist Church - we believe in one baptism. If a person was baptized as an infant or in another church, we still recognize that as a reception by the Holy Spirit into the body of the church universal. Another water baptism is not necessary. However, we are called to remember our baptism or participate in “Congregational Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant” from time to time.

Your baptism is more than an initiation into the body of Christ. It is a work of the Holy Spirit meant to bring you into a fellowship that will teach and lead by example, out of love of God and love for you. It is the responsibility of the church to equip new disciples of Jesus Christ and prepare them to invite, teach, and lead the next generation.

In college, I was accepted as a member of the cross country team. I learned and grew as a runner because of the leadership of others on the team, then did the same for underclassmen when it was my turn. I will never run with that team again, but I will continue to have a fellowship with the other guys who were part of the team. That team is part of this world and temporal. It is not forever.

Praise God that I am now part of his team, the church of Jesus Christ. I belong to a fellowship that is eternal, singing praises to God with my out of tune voice for now, but looking forward to the day I will be singing praises to him in my heavenly voice.
Glory be to God!