

The Baptism of Jesus and Ours

Today in the church calendar is “The Baptism of Jesus” Sunday, and the New Testament Scripture reading is Luke 3:15-17, and 21-22. Follow as I read this account of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist:

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Today I’m giving all of us an opportunity to reaffirm our baptism vows. But don’t be anxious. I know you’re aware of my background as a Baptist pastor, so I don’t want you to worry that I’m installing a baptismal tank and inviting you to be totally immersed (at least, not today!). No, instead, I’m challenging all of us, including myself, to review our baptismal vows which either we or our parents expressed at our baptism, whether as adults or as infants. It was a sacred time of commitment, whether as children or adults at our baptism, or later your confirmation.

Looking at the baptism of Jesus, important enough to be recorded in all of the gospel accounts, we find elements that help us understand the meaning of baptism—Jesus’ and ours. As you know, John the Baptist was the prophet who served as a link between the Old Covenant (Testament) and the New Covenant. He was called to be Jesus’ forerunner, to prepare the way for Jesus to begin his public ministry. His unusual attire and manner of preaching attracted large crowds, and the power of his message led many to repent of sin and to submit to John’s baptizing them in the Jordan River as a sign of their repentance. Along with the hosts who came to John was Jesus, who made the strange request to be baptized, along with those convicted of their sins and their need for repentance.

When Jesus approached John to be baptized by him, John at first demurred, realizing that Jesus was the expected Messiah. John told Jesus he was the one who should be doing the baptizing, since he was the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). John’s purpose as the forerunner was to prepare people to follow Jesus as the Messiah and Lord, saying that Jesus must become greater in people’s eyes, while he, John, must diminish in influence and importance (John 3:30).

But Jesus' request was honored, and John the Baptist agreed and baptized Jesus, an act that Jesus said would be a part of his plan and mission ("fulfill all righteousness," Matthew 3:15). Jesus' baptism was an important step in his work of bringing us righteousness, and our baptism is also an important step.

A Baptist pastor friend of mine had a horrendously busy Sunday, which included preaching in multiple worship services, doing an afternoon wedding, and then performing a baptism in the evening service. He met the baptismal candidate in the middle of the baptistery tank, opened the curtain, introduced the candidate, grasped his hands with his left hand and then raised his right hand to make the introduction and give the words of institution.

Being tired and a bit confused by the busy day, my pastor colleague then solemnly raised his right hand, and in his best ministerial voice said, "Marriage is an important institution of God." Then the pastor regained consciousness and realized where he was and what he was doing, and quickly added, "And so is baptism."

Baptism, yours and mine, is an important institution of God, and in Jesus' baptism we note that it expresses **repentance of sin**. John the Baptist was as direct and confrontational a preacher as could be imagined, and certainly not one to be subtle or to mince words. In fact, his condemnation of King Herod's sin led to his imprisonment and eventual beheading. Masses of people went out to hear this strange appearing and radical preacher, proclaiming judgment by the Jordan River, and then baptizing on the spot all who responded to his preaching with confession and repentance of sin.

So, why did Jesus, the sinless Son of God, go to John and ask for his baptism? As we've noted, John at first demurred, and expressed his unworthiness and said he was the one who should be baptized by Jesus. But Jesus' request for baptism was consistent with his humility and his mission, to seek after us lost sinners. Jesus' baptism would be a harbinger of the cross that would be the culmination of his earthly ministry. Baptism was expressive, not only of a washing away of sins, but also "to baptize" means to immerse under, to be overwhelmed, and so Jesus would express that his earthly life would end by his immersion into suffering and death for us sinners. In his baptism, Jesus was identifying himself with us sinners, saying he was stooping to our lowest level, and giving himself up to be our rescuer from sin's power and penalty. He, the sinless one, had come to rescue us sinners, and so to do so he identified with us and set the example, inviting us to identify with him as our Savior.

Our baptism marked us as sinners in need of God's gracious forgiveness. At either your baptism, or if as an infant, your later confirmation, you confessed your sin and God declared your forgiveness through Christ. We need to remember that we've been forgiven and saved by God's grace, and also that we continue to need God's gracious forgiveness throughout our mortal life.

Years ago I read Frederica Mathewes-Green's book, "The Jesus Prayer: the Ancient Desert Prayer that Tunes the Heart to God." She advocates the example of the ancient

desert monks, who disciplined themselves to repeat throughout the day the Scriptural prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." This simple prayer, repeated throughout the day, keeps our minds and hearts focused on our weak, sinful nature, and our dependence on God's mercy and grace given us freely through Christ Jesus. We're always in need of God's merciful and gracious forgiveness, made possible because of Jesus' baptism into suffering and death for us.

Jesus' baptism, and ours, marks also the **reception of the Spirit**. John announced that Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire, and when he was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove. His baptism and ours indicates that, for God's repentant children, he gives the gift of the Holy Spirit, a fiery presence that cleanses our hearts and minds and also that enables us to live out the new life he has given us.

One of the mysteries of the Trinity is how God the Son loved and obeyed perfectly God the Father, and depended on God the Holy Spirit. And as God's being-transformed people, we depend on the Holy Spirit for understanding, motivation and power to live a God-honoring life. The Holy Spirit is given to every child of God and is not the exclusive possession of the spiritually elite. And it's not a matter of getting more of the Spirit, but rather of giving ourselves to the leading and control of the Holy Spirit, of giving more of ourselves to him. And if the eternal Son of God depended on the baptism and leading of the Holy Spirit, how much more do we?

In my Baptist tradition, not so long ago, there was an event, sometimes annually or semi-annually, known as a revival meeting. Usually a guest evangelist preached a series of nightly meetings, lasting an entire week in the earlier days, and mercifully reduced to a weekend of services in the waning years of this tradition. The preacher-evangelist would call for the conversion of sinners and issue an invitation to them to come to the altar for prayer at the close of the service. Also, this invitation would include professing believers and church members who wanted to rededicate their lives to more consistent Christian behavior and more faithful service and church attendance.

In one rural church in Kentucky, the same member who had consistently strayed from the church and returned to bad habits that brought embarrassment to the little church, would attend the church's revival services, and come to the front during the altar call. Overcome with emotion, he would predictably cry aloud for God to once again fill him with the Holy Spirit. "O Lord, fill me, please fill me with the Holy Spirit!" The congregation would tolerate this annual display until finally one of the deacons cried out, interrupting the man's cry for infilling, saying, "Lord, don't do it. He leaks!"

The truth is that we all leak, and need the constant infilling. Actually, we need the continual surrendering of ourselves to the Holy Spirit's cleansing and control. We don't need to beg for his presence. He's with us never to leave us. We simply need to live to please and not to grieve him. Our baptism is a declaration of our dependence on the Spirit, who has descended into us as surely as he descended into Jesus at his baptism.

As the Messiah, the Christ, Jesus was commissioned for his task by the descent of the Holy Spirit. Christ/Messiah means literally “anointed one.” Jesus was endowed with the Spirit who would enable him to fulfill his mission as our Savior. And so we also depend on the Spirit for our anointing, our enablement of our commission to follow and serve him in missional living as our Master and Lord.

And Jesus’ baptism and ours is also a **reminder of his love**. When Jesus was baptized, the Father spoke reassuringly of his love for the Son and of his pleasure with him. How important it is that we know we’re loved by God! As we remember our baptism and prepare to renew our baptismal vows, it’s as important to know God loves us as it is to love him. The eternal Son of God needed this assurance of the Father’s love, and I suspect some of us here today need this reassurance as well.

I was blessed to have been loved by good parents, who did all they could to provide for and to encourage me. Yet, if my father was deficient in any way, it was in his inability to communicate love and affection. My efforts to be an overachiever in sports, music, school leadership of whatever, were prompted in large part to gain my father’s approval, which was difficult to obtain at times. Even later, when I became a pastor of a large church that didn’t show signs of outward success and numerical growth, my father had subtle, even unspoken ways of communicating lack of pleasure and a measure of disapproval. I found myself, long after my father’s death, doing things in ministry that might impress my dad and gain his approbation.

As a consequence, I’ve taken measures and utilized opportunities to express my pride in and approval of my grown, mid-career children. And I’m aware of my need to do this increasingly, to express my pride, not only at times when they’ve achieved, but all the time, even when they’ve done nothing more than live godly, faithful lives as parents themselves.

I can aver that God loves us and is pleased with you and me, even when we fail to live up to godly standards of behavior and kingdom living and serving. Because we are “in Christ,” the Father loves us just as he loves the “beloved Son,” Jesus. Maybe you and I need to take a piece of note paper and write, “Dear _____, I’m proud of you. Love, God.”

We don’t have to earn his love and approval. It’s been given to us and is ours forever. It will never be taken from us, and is our motivation to love him and others. We love, as John the Apostle wrote, because he first loved us.

Jesus’ baptism merges with and gives meaning to our baptism. Let’s be renewed in our ongoing, grateful repentance, our continual reception of the Spirit, and the reminder of his great love for us and his pleasure and delight in us.