

The Baptism of Our Lord (January 8, 2023) Text: Matthew 3: 13-17  
***“For Now . . . and for Eternity”***

It would appear that baptism has always been a problem.

It first presented itself as a problem when Jesus came to be baptized by John. After all, if Jesus was the Messiah, why in the world would he need to be baptized by John? While you can sense that all four evangelists struggled with this question, Matthew’s discomfort is perhaps most palpable.

His dilemma is resolved in the conversation between John and Jesus: John protests: ***“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”*** In the Baptist’s incredulity you sense Matthew’s. Jesus grants the awkwardness of the situation and gives both of them an out by saying a) that this is a temporary condition (***“let it be so for now”***) and b) that in this way they ***“fulfill all righteousness.”*** (We will need to come back to that.)

While Matthew and his colleagues solve this initial problem of Jesus being baptized by John, Christians ever since have struggled with a second question: Why is Jesus baptized at all?

Given that we typically connect baptism to forgiveness of sin, if Jesus is the sinless Son of God, in what way does he need baptism? Or, more broadly, how does baptism benefit him at all? On this point, all the evangelists agree: Baptism is not simply a mechanism for forgiveness but rather announces God’s favor and establishes Jesus’ identity.

For example, in Matthew’s account the voice from heaven announces that Jesus is God’s Son, the One with whom God is well pleased. Baptism, for Jesus, was less about forgiveness and more about commissioning; it is the inauguration of His mission and ministry and assurance of God’s presence.

But we need to back up here a tad. In today’s Second Lesson, Luke writes about ***“the baptism that John announced . . .”*** What was that baptism?

Mark tells us it was *“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (1:4). Now I know this is going to sound very much like sophist hair-splitting, but listen to that description carefully and you will note that John’s baptism was about repentance as preparation for forgiveness.

What’s the difference? In the Book of Acts, Paul encounters some people in Ephesus, identified as “believers,” and undergoes this exchange: *“He said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ They replied, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ Then he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They answered, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.”*

So, John’s baptism did not carry the requisite measure of forgiveness; it was not enough. John baptized for repentance. We are still left with the dilemma: Of what did Jesus have to repent? The answer, of course, is: nothing. So we need to look beyond the issue of repentance and discover the new meaning Jesus is giving to baptism by His submitting to it.

Two themes emerge: The first is that Jesus was embodying a behavior He would later command His followers to do as they took up His cross to follow Him. Baptism is such an important sacrament in the life of the church because it is an entry rite into membership in the community of faith, and it is a dying to sin and rising in faith and righteousness. St. Paul writes to the Romans: *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”* (6:3-4) When Jesus submits to John’s baptism, He is setting the course for us to follow.

The second theme emerges as Jesus announces that His baptism is a fulfillment of God’s righteousness. This act was not only modeling submission and consecration to His coming mission, it was also an act

of being in “solidarity with sinners.” Standing in solidarity with those who often feel unworthy of God’s love and grace is a powerful act that is vividly portrayed in His baptism and throughout the ministry of Jesus. Throughout His ministry, Jesus practiced “open commensality” (to quote a term from one New Testament scholar) — He would eat with anyone, which the stiff-necks of His day thought unthinkable. Jesus ate with outcasts and Pharisees, tax collectors and the well-to-do, sinners and those who thought they had no sin.

In the life of the Church, Baptism is a common bond among people of widely varying backgrounds, ethnicity, history, culture, and behaviors. Jesus modeled this in His ministry, and thereby invites us to the same attitude and outreach.

Which brings us to the crucial (and I’ll want to emphasize that word in a moment) question: What does Baptism mean to us? Or, put it more pointedly, why does Baptism so often mean so little to us?

You may protest my saying that. But let me ask: How often do you celebrate the anniversary of your baptism? Do you even know the anniversary of your baptism? The date, place, and time of your baptism does matter, but is not the central issue.

Luther tells us: “*When you wash your face, remember your baptism.*” That word “remember” has become a purely intellectual exercise for us; but break the word down and you get “re-” (again) “member” (the parts). To remember your baptism is to get take the parts of what Baptism means and bring them together — it means to re-enter, relive, re-experience what God has done. Luther’s invitation is not simply to recall that you have been baptized (even if you cannot cite the date, time, and/or place), but to let what God has done radiate through your entire being, your daily life, and especially your relationships with others.

I just used the phrase “*what God has done*” twice now, and that’s not right; the correct phrase would be “*what God is doing.*” Baptism cannot be for us a past event; it is always to be a present condition with a secured

future. Luther was fond of saying, “*I am baptized,*” not “*I was baptized.*”

Dr. Donald Stuppy writes: “*Baptism is a very simple act. All we do is apply water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. From the standpoint of human reason, it would be foolish to think that such an act could be of any real value. How could such a simple deed be of benefit for the soul, wash away sin, or give eternal life? It does so by virtue of the Word of God connected with the water! And, even though our Baptism may have taken place years ago, and even though we, personally, have no recollection of the blessed event, it does indeed have infinite value for all who have been baptized.*”

“Infinite value” means that it cannot be something locked into the fading past; our Baptisms are preparing us for living out the present and the future.

A while back I read a book by Dr. Kenneth Bailey on St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. Before I ever reached the discussion of the Baptismal part of that letter, I was captivated by Dr. Bailey’s insistence that, at the very heart of this letter is the concern about “how to live as a Christian in a pagan world.”

Paul’s world, and that of the Corinthians, was undeniably pagan. I think we live in a pagan world, if by “pagan” we mean devoid of those characteristics that embrace what the God of the Bible reveals about Himself and His Son. But before I got to any of that discussion from Dr. Bailey’s book, he points out that Paul jumps in at the outset of his letter to discuss the importance of Baptism. Baptism is foundational for the Christian life.

I used the term “crucial” earlier and said I wanted to come back to it. That word comes from the Latin word *crux*, which means “cross.” To say that something is crucial commonly means it is at the center — the crossroads, if you will — of what ever is going on.

We need to hear the word in this context as tying Baptism to the cross of Jesus Christ. Our lives are to be cruciform — that is, shaped by the cross.

What we do, what we say, how we think, what we hold as value — all of the Christian life is tied up in the cross of Jesus Christ. Your Baptism has made you cruciform and that makes your life crucial.

In today's Second Lesson, Peter declares to the household of Cornelius that he "gets it" — "***I truly understand . . .***" This understanding came as an insight from a vision Peter had where he saw a blanket come down from heaven on which were arrayed all the foods Jews were forbidden to eat. Peter is told to eat that food; he refuses. God tells him: "***What God has made clean, you must not call profane.***" (Acts 10:15) As Peter is puzzling over this, three men from Cornelius' household come looking for him, and invite him to share the Good News with them. As my grandfather used to say, "*Comes me a light on.*" Boing! Peter gets it; the Good News is not limited to a select crowd, but to any and all who would hear and embrace it.

Hear then the words of Isaiah from today's First Lesson:

***Thus says God, the LORD,  
who created the heavens  
and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and  
what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the  
people upon it  
and spirit to those who  
walk in it:  
<sup>6</sup> I am the LORD, I have  
called you in righteousness,***

***I have taken you by the hand  
and kept you;  
I have given you as a  
covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,  
<sup>7</sup> to open the eyes that are  
blind,  
to bring out the prisoners  
from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who  
sit in darkness.***

This idea that God intended the Good News to be universal has its roots in the very beginning of the Scriptures. The people of Israel decided on their own that the covenant with God was an exclusive, not inclusive, prospect. But they kept it to themselves; refusing to share, and considering all who were not they to be outcast, rejected, and profane. I'm not so sure we have improved on that attitude — at least by our

actions.

So this morning we are going to engage in what has become a frequent ritual on this First Sunday after the Epiphany — The Baptism of Our Lord: We are going to enter into A Rite for the Remembrance of the Baptism Covenant. This in no way is to suggest that our Baptisms need renewing like the book you took out of the library last month or your subscription to Reader's Digest, nor are we saying that Baptism is somehow unable to be sustained unless we periodically get a booster shot. It is to suggest that, more and more, we need to reflect upon our Baptisms, and then let that reflection guide us into living the life to which Christ calls us.

Dr. David Lose writes: *“I believe we need make teaching the significance of baptism a priority. This shouldn't occur only in the sermon, of course. Confession of sin is a time to remember baptism. Communion is an extension of the baptismal promise. The dismissal is the time to send us forth to live out our baptism in our various roles and vocations in the world.”* Baptism isn't something that happened to us; it is something that dwells within us. Jesus told John ***“Let it be so now. . .”*** with regard to His own Baptism — because Baptism is always for now . . . and for eternity.

A final quote from Luther is in order: *“We must boldly and without fear hold fast to our Baptism, and set it high against all sins and terrors of conscience. We must humbly admit, ‘I know full well I cannot do a single thing that is pure, But I am baptized and through my Baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound Himself in a covenant with me. He will not count my sin against me, but will blot it out.’”*

With that assurance we rejoice to say: *“I am baptized !”*

Amen.