

“The Covenant of Baptism”
Salado UMC—14 January 2018
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
Preaching Text: Mark 1:4-11—Year B
Salado, Texas 76571

**“DELUGE, n. A notable first experiment in baptism
which washed away the sins (and sinners) of the world”
(Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary).**

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When Matthew tells of Jesus’ baptism, Matthew relates an argument at the Jordan. Jesus, like so many others, comes to John at the Jordan for baptism. But John recognizes Jesus and says/asks Jesus: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Clearly John, who stoops to no one, defers to Jesus. John knows who this is who comes to him—the “one who is more powerful than I,” as John puts it. Yet, all discussion terminates when Jesus tells John ““Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented” (Matthew 3: 15).

When Luke tells the story of Jesus’ baptism, Luke fails to explicitly say that it was John who baptized Jesus, although Luke does tell us that John was baptizing. Luke leaves the matter up in the air, so to speak: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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’ ” (Luke 3:21-22).

Mark’s story of Jesus is as usual quite compact. Hear the day’s lesson:

[4] John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [5] And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. [6] Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. [7] He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. [8] I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

[9] In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. [10] And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. [11] And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:4-11).

Our New Testament includes two different understandings of baptism and at times Christians confuse John's "so-called" baptism with the baptism of water and the Holy Spirit. What John was doing when he baptized was sort of a *pre-Christian* baptism. It prepared the people for Messiah's coming. For this reason, we rightly understand John as "the one who is to prepare the way." John's baptism is clearly a baptism of repentance. This baptism readies the people for Messiah's coming. At Jesus' baptism a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved," and then does true Christian baptism occur—completed with water and the Spirit. This is what we are about today—Christian baptism by water and the Spirit. Baptism ties us directly to being a Christian. It is redundant to say that "I am a baptized Christian," because to be a Christian implies baptism. In Jesus' arrival at the Jordan we enter into the realm and time of authentic Christian baptism. But what does baptism mean for us?

First of all, the church's tradition believes that Christians are not born; they are made. This suggests that through the gift of God, we enter a community that understands itself to be under God's authority revealed in Jesus Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit. We are not self-made people, and as odd as this sounds to us modern Americans, without the church and its people, we cannot be properly "made." Through baptism and the church, God teaches, molds, and fashions us as God's people. Baptism is the entry point into the life of God's kingdom.

When someone asked Martin Luther, "How do you know you are a Christian?" the crusty old pastor replied, "You know that you are baptized—that's all you need to know." A Christian is someone who by "water and the word" has begun to live the death and resurrection of Jesus in her/his life (Willimon: *Remember Who You Are*, The Upper Room, 1980, p. 9).

Second of all, baptism gives us our Christian identity. Certainly, there are many voices telling us who we are: consumers, a bundle of sexual appetites, an over-achiever, a wage-earner, a tax payer and so on. But baptism tells us we are God's people. As heaven's voice tells Jesus, "You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," so the voice tells us in baptism as well. To use the words of a baptism hymn: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). Baptism tells us we are part of God's people.

Did you hear about the plan concerning animal identification? As a result of "Mad Cow" disease and other kinds of animal maladies, our government proposed that each animal have some sort of identification. The suggested legislation stated that "All animals . . . transported, purchased, or sold, in commerce, by a dealer or exhibitor shall be marked or identified at such time and in such humane manner as the Secretary [of agriculture] may prescribe." Whether by implants or by tattooed numbers on the upper lips, the proposal suggests the identification of every farm animal for tracking. Baptism does many things for us. First it reminds us of Tertullian's remark: "Christians are made, not born." Second, we know that baptism tells us who we are as the people of God. And third, baptism does for Christians what animal

identification does for animals—it marks us as people who belong to God. Baptism is a kind of a divine signature on our lives that identifies us as the people of God.

Baptism is a covenant between God and God’s people. God marks us as God’s children and this is an everlasting covenant. Today we will renew our covenant with God for one reason—we too often forget what is good for us and what is in our best interests. Our UM hymnal has an excellent essay on baptism (page 32)—the most succinct and helpful I have seen. Among other things, this essay reminds us that “while our baptismal vows are less than reliable, God’s promise to us in the sacrament is steadfast” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, UMPH [Nashville, TN: 1989] p. 32).

I have a preacher friend and when he and his wife go to wedding where he is only a “civilian” she shakes him up. They sit together in the pew—a rare occurrence—and observe the bridal couple assume vows and covenant promises to one another. He tells me that during the recital of the covenant promises of marriage, his spouse will squeeze his hand as if to say, “Hey, Bub, pay attention—these are the vows and promises you once made. How are you doing in your fulfillment of them?” If we watch any child or adult take such baptismal vows, then we have the opportunity to measure our fulfillment of our covenant promises to God and to each other. The church, through the ritual and practice of baptism, offers us a solid reminder of what God has done for us, is doing for us, and will continue to do for us, for ever and ever. This is what we call “The Covenant of Baptism.” Amen.

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