

Baptism of the Lord (Year C)

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. 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.'

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.'

If you're like me, you have no recollection of your baptism for you were baptized as an infant. Chances were, a few months after you were born, your parents dressed you up in a fancy white dress or gown, brought you to worship, and put you in the arms of a strange man or woman in a black robe who proceeded to very rudely pour icy cold water over your formerly cozy head.

Or, perhaps you *do* remember the occasion of your baptism. Perhaps you were an teenager or adult who publicly professed your faith and remember vividly the moment when you stood before the congregation and were sprinkled by the font or dunked within the waters of a stream or ocean.

Or, perhaps you have yet to be baptized and are curious as to what it's all about.

No matter the status or circumstance of your baptism, today's text from the gospel of Luke invites us to explore the nature of baptism and its effect upon our lives.

The first Sunday after the Epiphany is called Baptism of the Lord Sunday. It is when we celebrate the occasion of Jesus' baptism. Even though only a few days ago, Jesus was a wee baby in a manger being showered with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, today Jesus has miraculously aged 30-something years and we are now standing beside him in the muddy waters of the Jordan river waiting to be baptized. And he is not going to be baptized by just anyone; Jesus going to be baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist, who had formerly danced within his mother Elizabeth's womb when Jesus (in his mother's womb) greeted them.

Today's passage from Luke reminds us that Jesus' baptism is the "hinge¹" that moves us from Jesus' birth to his ministry of hope and healing. Jesus' baptism is the necessary first step to seal his call to preach the Gospel. Since Jesus was baptized with common people like you and me, *our* baptisms are, likewise, the "hinges" that transform us into the disciples God calls us to be.

You see, baptism is a gift and, if we are not careful, it can be a gift whose importance can be all too easy to take for granted. Since most of us do *not* remember the occasion of our baptisms and have

¹ with many thanks to Robert Brearly for this analogy in Feasting on the Word - Year C - Volume 1.

likely not seen one in quite some time, we must take care to remember and rejoice in the wonder of baptism and its call upon our lives. Today is not just a day to rejoice in Jesus' baptism but also an occasion to rejoice and explore our own baptisms!

Too often, when we think of baptism, we don't go much further than think about a scrapbook picture of a cute baby being sprinkled with water from a font. We "ooooh" and "ahhhhh" but don't go much deeper than that. To be perfectly clear, there is joy that can and should be found in welcoming a precious baby into the family of God. That is, in fact, one of the things we do and should celebrate when we baptize an infant (or adult for that matter). However, baptism is not one dimensional. In fact, baptism has at least five dimensions to it and I'd like to share those with you today. If you look in the insert in your bulletin, you will find these five metaphors listed out for your convenience.

The first metaphor of baptism is this: **baptism joins us into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.** This is a hard metaphor to recognize in the way that most Presbyterians practice baptism; sprinkling water over the head doesn't quite embody the metaphor of death and resurrection. This is where the ancient tradition of baptism by submersion better emphasizes death and resurrection. In this practice, the person being baptized would be fully submersed beneath the water to represent a death like Jesus Christ, as if joining him in that cold, and lonely tomb. Then, the person would be brought up out of the water to represent joining Christ in his resurrection. The person, literally, would be gasping for air, being reminded that the new life they have is from the Lord by whom they have now been claimed. It is interesting, then, to think of death as a important part of every baptism for in every baptism we die to our former selves and are resurrected with Jesus Christ who has once and for all snatched us from the jaws of death.

The second metaphor of baptism is this: **baptism represents conversion, pardoning, and cleansing from sin.** This is where things can get a little tricky because, at first glance, this doesn't seem to apply when practicing infant baptism; when we look at a cute little infant in a white baptismal dress, the last thing most of us are thinking about is how sinful that baby is. However, I have some tough news for everyone: even babies, no matter how cute and adorable they look, are sinful. As reformed protestants, we believe in a thing called total depravity which basically means that none of us are free of sin no matter our age or any other circumstance. Therefore, baptism, whether celebrated by an adult or a cute little infant, represents a cleansing from sin. Now, obviously, that does not mean that we cease to sin after our baptisms! However, to be cleansed from sin means that we belong not to sin but to a Savior who pardons us of our sin. Therefore, baptism can be thought of as the beginning of a life-long journey in which we respond to the fact that we are no longer slaves to sin but are free to follow Jesus Christ who, himself, has been baptized with us.

The third metaphor of baptism is this: **baptism blesses us with the gift of the Holy Spirit.** We believe that without the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are hopelessly lost. Baptism is the beginning of the Spirit's journey with us to guide us along the way. You see, baptism is the beginning of a journey. And the beginning of any journey needs direction and purpose. We don't necessarily need to know where we are going or how we are to get there but what we certainly *do* need to know who it is that goes with us. In our case, our baptisms promise us that the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism descends upon us in ours. The Spirit guides us through thick and thin and each time we remember our baptism, we remember that we do not go alone. Just as the Spirit moved over the face of the waters in the beginning of creation, the Spirit guides us as God continues to create us as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The fourth metaphor of baptism is this: **baptism incorporates us into the Body of Christ.** In some ways, this metaphor is an extension of the previous one; since baptism blesses us with the gift of the

Holy Spirit, that same Holy Spirit inspires us and leads us to be the Body of Christ in the world. Every time we baptize a child or an adult, that child of God is commissioned to be the hands of Christ in the world. Each commissioning that we do, whenever a deacon or elder is ordained to their office, whenever pastor such as myself is ordained to my office, whenever a new member is welcomed to a congregation, whenever a person takes vows during a marriage, each of these occasions is, in fact, an extension of the commission given in that person's baptism. This metaphor reminds us that during our baptism, God looks upon us, as God did with Jesus, and says "you are my beloved child, whom I love dearly. Because of this, I have a job for you!" This leads us to our final metaphor.

The fifth metaphor of baptism is this: **baptism embodies the coming Kingdom of God.** All of our baptisms embody a foretaste of the coming Kingdom of God which is both here and now *and* yet to come. In the Book of Revelation, we are promised that God will bring a world to come in which death and dying will be no more, when all the tears will be wiped from every eye. Baptism represents this promise and seals it to us through the waters of God's grace. This is what makes baptism a rather radical liturgical practice, when you think about it. Each and every baptism is a countercultural practice in which the person being baptized is inaugurated as a citizen of a kingdom that surpasses any earthly realm or reign. Baptism is a reminder that, ultimately, we do not belong to Caesar or Uncle Sam. Ultimately, we belong to God who will last long after Caesar and Uncle Sam have disappeared into history. Baptism reminds us that God and God alone is both our beginning and end and, friends, we must remember that there is no better news than that!

Well, there we have it! Baptism is not simply an appetizer that complements our worship. Baptism is, all by itself, a five course meal - a grand feast of Gospel proclamation that reminds us who we are and whose we are. Hopefully, this journey has highlighted the ways in which these five metaphors intertwine with each other and complement one another.

I'd like to finish today with a story that I recently heard. There was a man who grew up in England in the mid-1700's by the name of Robert Robinson. As a youth, he was quite the troublemaker, having a penchant for drinking and gambling. One day, he and his friends showed up at a worship service led by the great preacher, George Whitefield, for the express purpose of disturbing the event and making fun of his evangelical speech. However, something changed within Robert Robinson that day. He was moved by Whitefield's sermon and dedicated his life to becoming a Methodist pastor. This problem-child turned preacher grew up and, five years later, at the age of 22, penned the words to a little hymn we all know called "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing."

*Come, thou Fount of every blessing; tune my heart to sing thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above;
praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it, mount of God's unchanging love.*

These beautiful lyrics remind us of streams of mercy that never cease; streams of mercy that surround us in our baptism and give us a never-ending supply of grace and love. However, Robinson, as is the case with many pastors and preachers, did not always do a very good job of allowing himself to receive the grace that he wrote about in that timeless hymn. Robinson was, in fact, a very tortured soul who suffered from depression.

According to legend, while in a particularly melancholy mood, Robinson shared a stagecoach with a young woman who began to hum, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." Once she finished humming

the tune, Robinson sorrowfully said to the woman, "Madam, I am the poor, unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then."

The young woman paused for a moment and then replied, "sir, the streams of mercy are still flowing."²

Friends, perhaps the most important element of baptism is that it reminds us - and calls us to remind each other - that "the streams of mercy are still flowing." Never forget that.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.