

“Immersed in God’s Grace”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Baptism of Jesus – January 12, 2020

Matthew 3: 13-17

Any of you who have dogs know what “fun” it is to give them a bath. I use the term “fun” rather facetiously. Our dog, Ethel, is a Cairn Terrier, so it’s much easier to get her into the bathtub and manage her than it would be for those of you who have much larger dogs. Whenever I bathe Ethel, she’s fairly excited about it before we start. But once she’s in the tub and the water starts washing over her, her mood changes. She’s ready to be done – and it can be hard to keep her still long enough to soap her up and then wash her off.

What’s always fascinating to me is to see the difference in Ethel between being dry and being wet. For those of you who have dogs, maybe you experience this, too. When she’s dry, she’s all fluffed up and looks like, well, she’s supposed to look. But when I get her all wet for her bath, she looks completely different. All her fur is matted down, her eyes stick out like two big marbles, and she’s practically a different animal. It’s quite a transformation to see her all wet compared to when she is dry.

I think we all know what that feels like, don’t we? When we’re in the shower or the bathtub, it might not be the most dramatic of changes like Ethel, but certainly our head and hair look very different when they’re all wet compared to when they are dry. Or when we get stuck in a rainstorm without an umbrella, our clothes just stick to us like syrup, and we literally have to peel them off when we get inside. Our appearance changes significantly when we are soaking wet compared to when we are dry.

But there are times when we welcome that feeling, or at least I know I do. When it’s a hot, summer day, and we dive into a swimming pool, that feeling of being enveloped in the coolness of the water is refreshing and soothing. When we’re at the beach, and we dive head-first into a crashing-wave, it is invigorating to feel the ocean surround us. There is almost an other-worldly feeling when we are immersed in water. There is resistance and pressure on our entire body when we are surrounded by water, unlike when we are dry and surrounded by air. But there is also this feeling of being buoyed and lifted up when we are in water. I believe that is primal, for it recalls how each of us were nurtured and enveloped in our mother’s womb before we were born. It is definitely transformative when we are immersed in the waters of this earth.

Today we remember the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his earthly adult ministry as he was immersed in the River Jordan by John.

And in so doing, we remember the gift of baptism we have received, and how that gift of God's grace envelopes each of us in our lives of service to God.

Throughout the church's history, there have been debates and schisms on how someone should be baptized. In the Presbyterian Church, one may be baptized as an infant, a child, or an adult, either by sprinkling or by immersion. Willy here is ordained in the Disciples of Christ, Christian Church, and they adhere to baptism by immersion when someone is a teenager or adult - what is often called believer's baptism. (It would be kind of hard to get a whole person in this bowl, wouldn't it, Willy?) Ultimately, though, what matters most is that baptism takes place in the name of the triune God.

What I find interesting about Jesus' baptism is that the debate wasn't over how he was to be baptized. John didn't ask him, "Would you prefer to be sprinkled or dunked, Jesus?" What John had at his disposal was the River Jordan, and the only real way to baptize someone at a river is to go all the way under! And at this point in Jesus' life he was already an adult, so there was no debate over what age he should come for baptism with his parents or guardians.

No, the debate in this case was whether John should baptize Jesus at all. John was unsure as to his authority to do such a thing, for the "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me" (3:11). He knew how great Jesus was to be, for the both of them were the gifts of the Holy Spirit to their mothers, Elizabeth and Mary. Jesus was the King of kings who would come to judge the world, to separate the wheat from the chaff, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, not with water. Why would Jesus want John to baptize him with water, when he was the Son of God?

Jesus answers his question by saying: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." It is not a clear answer, but it points to who Jesus is and what his role is in God's plan. Jesus is God in flesh and bone, a human being who walks and talks and thinks and feels. It is "proper" for Jesus to come to John who baptizes humans, for it is as a human being that Jesus is to minister to God's world. It is as a human being that he teaches God's Word, heals the lame, cures the sick, welcomes the children, rebukes the Pharisees, and experiences the pain and suffering of death on a cross. Jesus is God's agent of change and love and peace to the world, and he is sealed as God's agent in his human baptism in the Jordan. Only his baptism is marked by the arrival of the Holy Spirit, a sign that God is truly a part of what he is doing. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (3:17)

Everyone should hear that statement whenever someone is baptized in the church. "This is my son, my daughter, my child, with whom I am well pleased." The sign of baptism is that we as Christians are sealed by the grace of God with water, as was the case with Jesus in the

Jordan. It is a ritual which remembers his act of humility, an example to his disciples and to us all. In baptism we are claimed by God, we are protected by God, we are moved by God and the Spirit to be agents of God for the glory of God. Jesus insisted on being baptized by John so that those who follow him would do so in remembrance of him. That is the meaning of Jesus' baptism by John.

Our baptism is not a one-time thing. It is something which we continually reaffirm and profess our faith in through worship, prayer, and service to God. And every time we reaffirm and remember our baptism, we are reminded how that gift of grace gives us the power to serve in Christ's name each and every day of our lives.

There is a tendency in the church to think that baptism is an ending. We might feel that it's important to have our baby baptized so that she or he is "taken care of" or "safe" from whatever may come in the future. Or, as a teenager going through confirmation, we might believe that once we're baptized, that's it - that's the culmination of all our time and work, and now we're finished.

Rodger Nishioka reflects on this tendency in the church. He writes: *Despite our best intentions and despite all that we say and try to communicate, too many people seem to think that the baptism of the infant or the young adult or the adult is the culminating activity of faith, and then we are all "done." Matthew's description of Jesus' baptism tells us the opposite.*

In Matthew's text, the baptism of Jesus is not the ending of his ministry. In Matthew's text, the baptism of Jesus is the beginning of his ministry. It is his launching. It is his commissioning to begin the public ministry for which he was created and to which he was called. To be sure, the baptism of Jesus named his identity, and this is crucial. Identity, however, is not a static thing. One's identity grows and deepens, as did Jesus' identity throughout his public ministry. His identity is as much about purpose as it is about personhood (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 238*).

When we are baptized - at whatever age, in whatever manner - it is our commissioning into the purpose God has laid out for us in our lives. It is a beginning - a launching, as Nishioka puts it - into our lives of service and discipleship in Christ's name. It envelopes us with God's grace each and every day we are blessed to be on this earth. The waters of baptism immerse us in God's life-giving love, and bring us a sense of joyful purpose and humble exuberance as witnesses of the one with whom God is so pleased.

(show last picture) As I reflected on this passage today, my mind kept coming back to this picture. This is the Rev. Scott Hauser. He served as one of the Lake Fellow Interns at Second Presbyterian Church here in Indianapolis, before he served churches in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. I believe this photo was taken at his church in Wisconsin, and

it captures my vision of baptism as joyful purpose and humble exuberance. The waters are flung high into the air. Scott's face is full of joy and praise. It is from these waters that God births us into lives of discipleship.

The other reason this picture stuck in my head when it came to baptism was our understanding that our baptism surrounds and claims us throughout our earthly lives. In the funeral liturgy, when we are giving thanks to God for someone's life of service, we will pray: "We thank you for your servant, O Lord, whose baptism is now complete in death." This sacrament which Jesus instituted launches us as witnesses our entire lives to the promise we know of life eternal.

Scott Hauser died two years ago, after a short battle with cancer, at the age of 37-years-old. It was devastating to his family, his friends, and the church he served in suburban Milwaukee. I never knew Scott, never met him. But from this photo, I feel like I will always know his faith and his trust in God's enveloping grace - a faith that was rooted in his baptism.

Later in the service, we will remember our baptismal vows. As we do most years, we will invite you to come and take one of these small blue stones out of the baptismal font, which is filled with water. I would invite you to place that stone somewhere that is meaningful to you, so you might remember being immersed by God's grace. Maybe it's in your purse, or maybe it's in your pocket, or maybe it's on your nightstand, or maybe it's in your car. Wherever that may be, may this stone recall for you the joyful purpose and humble exuberance you are called to in your baptism.

And when the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work here is done - may we all know and trust that our baptism is complete, and we will be welcomed into God's loving embrace.

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