

010922      Baptism of Our Lord    Luke 3:15-22  
"Who Needs To Be Baptized?"

Several years ago, I recall visiting an elderly member of our congregation. We talked and prayed about her health, her family, and her faith. I remember noticing and asking about a large, framed, ornate, certificate hanging in her room. "That is my baptism certificate," she told me proudly. The certificate was decoratively printed, illustrated with detailed color pictures of Bible stories about Baptism. It was quite beautiful, and the certificate hung in a place of honor in this woman's home. We talked about the powerful meaning that her baptism still had in her life, some ninety-plus years later, as a child of the heavenly Father.

I remember driving back to church that day, thinking, "Boy, that inexpensive little baptism certificate we give out is pretty pale in comparison."

Today we hear the story of Jesus' baptism, and I don't believe that Jesus received a certificate at all when he was baptized. But the Bible tells us that Jesus indeed went to the Jordan River to be baptized by the wilderness preacher John the Baptist. Why was John baptizing people back then? His message was clear. "Repent," John told the people. "Stop taking your spiritual standing with God for granted," John preached. "Your sins and spiritual failings are putting you in jeopardy with God. Come and be baptized, as a sign of spiritual remorse, heartfelt repentance. Be baptized, because you desperately need a clean start with God."

Normally, in the Jewish tradition, the only people baptized were converts to the Jewish faith. The Jews themselves were taught that, as the covenant nation of God, they were already had a safe, secure relationship with God. But now here was this loud, bold preacher, John, convicting them of

their sin, convincing them of their need for a clean spiritual start. Those people needed to be baptized.

But what about Jesus? The perfect, holy, sinless God-man? He was born of Mary, and he lived a fully human life, but Jesus was without sin. He needed no spiritual cleansing, no fresh spiritual start. And, yet, Jesus submitted to John's baptism, as a way of identifying himself fully with sinful humanity. He was just beginning his public ministry, which would culminate with his death and resurrection for us. So his baptism, also, was for us. Jesus needed to be baptized, for different reasons than we do, as a means of bonding with sinners like us.

Who needs to be baptized today? Well, Christian baptism is not the same baptism that John the Baptist performed. John said it himself in our Gospel lesson: "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." When we are baptized in the name of Christ, it's not just a symbolic washing, or an act of repentance on our part. Rather, baptism is a powerful sacrament, a sacred action of God himself, in which God binds himself to the individual person. God's grace and mercy are poured out on a personal level. God's Holy Spirit is given, and the Spirit stirs saving faith in that sinner's heart. Baptism is God's way of accepting us -- one humble, helpless, spiritually-lacking person at a time -- into a covenant relationship with him.

Who, then, needs to be baptized? We all do! Every human does. Every man and woman, every girl and boy, is captive to sin. We're all part of a fallen human race, and all of our relationships with God are in jeopardy because of our rebellion and disobedience. And this is why Christ commanded his followers, immediately before his ascension,

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

So when Christian parents bring a baby to be baptized, they are recognizing that even that tiny little infant is in need of God's grace. But it's not the parents' actions, or the pastor's words, or the congregation's affirmations that do anything at all. It's not that the water is holy or special. It's God working to bring his grace into the life of a sinner. Baptism is God forgiving, God saving, God promising his blessings.

Baptism is 100% God's work. Whether it's an infant baptized, or a grown-up, the baptized brings nothing. The baptized does nothing. We humans are totally, completely reliant on God's mercy for forgiveness. And, in Baptism, God provides it.

Our Epistle Lesson for today puts it this way. Paul asks in Romans 6, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” There's nothing more helpless or hopeless than death, right? Paul goes on. “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” In other words, we are completely helpless and hopeless, in and of ourselves. But, in Baptism, we are brought back to spiritual life, just as Christ himself was raised from the dead.

So who needs to be baptized? Don't you need that spiritual rebirth every day? Aren't we all struggling daily with our sins? When we're honest about how bad our sinful condition is, we might well end up feeling like, “Man, I need to be baptized over and over again!”

And that's not a bad thing, to be aware of just how spiritually lacking we really are. But, instead of despairing, instead of thinking "I'd better run down to Falls Lake to get re-baptized," what we really need to do is to rejoice because our baptism is God's work, not ours. Forgiveness and salvation are God's gifts to us, because of what Christ did for us, not because of how good or faithful we manage to be.

What sinners like us need to do is what John the Baptist was urging the people to do in their hearts back in his day. Whenever you feel a spiritual lacking, or struggle in your faith, humbly throw yourself on God's mercy, over and over again. Rely fully – completely, utterly -- on God's grace for you in Christ. And the God who poured out his love and compassion on you on your baptism day will keep pouring it out on you.

Your baptism, brothers and sisters, is a powerful and effective reality, every single day of your Christian life. Baptism reminds us that our connection with God is fully dependent on his work, his mercy, his grace. In Baptism, God brought you into a special covenant relationship with him. And God is hanging on to you, in that relationship. God is loving you, caring for you, protecting you always, even on your very worst day.

I told you earlier about that large, framed baptism certificate I saw hanging in that church member's home. I talked about it with our staff here, and we found a modern version of that certificate. And this is what we now give out to everyone we baptize. We don't know if everyone frames it, and hangs it in their homes. But we pray that your baptism, however long ago it was, gives you joy every day, gives you hope when you're struggling. Baptism reminds us that we are utterly reliant on God's mercy. That mercy is yours, today and always, in Christ Jesus. Amen.