

What's Baptism?
Matthew 3:13-17
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 11, 2009

We last saw Jesus an infant in a manger who, after being visited by wise men and shepherds, was whisked away to Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod.

Today's gospel story, traditionally read this second Sunday in January, now finds Jesus an adult, roughly thirty years later having something done that usually happens only to sinners: being baptized by John the Baptist, in the River Jordan.

John's calling was to prepare the Jews for the imminent arrival of their Messiah. His message to the Jews: "Repent and be baptized." People came from far away to line up, starting on the shore and into the river, for the cleansing of their sins.

Naturally, John was startled to see Jesus next on line. John speaks for all of us when he asked, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?"

Since baptism was for the cleansing of sin, why did Jesus submit to John's baptism? The scriptures teach only one without sin could die for the sins of the world, and only Jesus qualified. Jesus knew he was the Son of God, and being sinless had no need for either repentance or baptism. Still, Jesus submitted, telling John, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Translation: It's OK John; let's do this anyway if only to make these people right with God."

There are multiple reasons why Jesus got baptized and they're all mysteriously inter-related. Let's try to sort them out and then try to see how it finally all comes together. But as I name these reasons keep in mind this important fact: Jesus wasn't baptized for himself, Jesus was baptized for us. Jesus wasn't baptized for his own good, but for our own good. If you grasp this, his baptism not only makes sense, you realize it's the key ingredient of our salvation.

The first reason for Jesus' baptism was to express his solidarity with humanity. The mystery of the incarnation (literally "in the flesh") is all about God becoming one of us. Patiently waiting his turn on that long line of sinners to be baptized reveals how Jesus saw himself. Not elbowing his way to the front of the line speaks volumes about his intentions. He didn't come to be served, but to serve. That's how Jesus identified himself with humanity, not just at his baptism but until the day he died. Read the Gospels, Jesus spent his life looking for people to love and serve, not just the beautiful people, but especially very unattractive people. He didn't just preach at them, he befriended and lived with them, eating their food, sharing their burdens, accepting them, warts and all.

Unfortunately Jesus' chosen lifestyle was roundly criticized and his reputation damaged by the constant barrage of accusations. The religious people, shocked by Jesus' refusal to pass judgment on tax collectors, prostitutes and all the other n'er do wells of society complained, "Don't you see Jesus, these sinners are delaying the Messiah's coming. He won't come until everybody in Israel gets their act together, like us, and obeys the Law of Moses. When you welcome these terrible people you're only endorsing their dysfunction and they'll continue on the merry way. Because of you our Messiah

will never come!" Jesus would answer, "No my friends, you got it backwards. The Messiah won't stay away because people are sinners. He comes precisely because people are sinners. The Messiah comes not to condemn but to save the world.

Which brings us to the second reason for Jesus' baptism; it was his inauguration/ordination to be the Christ. In just a few weeks our new president will be inaugurated in Washington. Last week we ordained new elders and deacons to be servant leaders in our congregation. In both cases, individuals chosen for a specific task, are being recognized and empowered to fulfill their callings.

In a very real sense, Jesus' baptism was his inauguration/ordination to Christship. God the Father affirmed God the Son when he said, "You are my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased." God the Spirit, in the form of a dove, empowered God the Son to love and serve God and humanity unconditionally and faithfully, especially after the hard times began.

Like a new elder's ordination or a new president's inauguration, Jesus' baptism was an occasion to celebrate his calling and the empowerment that went with it. But these necessary celebrations are always short-lived, because soon enough the trials and tribulations begin testing that calling. For that reason it's important during the hard times to revisit that celebration to remember and claim the affirmation and empowerment freely given. Only then can you go on to accomplish your given task.

This was certainly true of Jesus' baptism to be the Christ, who suffered and died for the sins of the world. You see Jesus realized his baptism could only be consummated on the cross. Jesus was baptized to be crucified.

There's an unnerving story told in Matthew's gospel that reveals the terrible price Jesus paid to be the Christ, and the corresponding high cost of discipleship.

James and John attempted to manipulate Jesus into giving them both high office once his Kingdom was established. "Grant us to sit one at your right hand and one at your left when you come in your glory."

Jesus, nonplused at their audacity, gently responded, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you prepared to drink the cup I must drink or be baptized with my baptism?" Being either ignorant or arrogant or both the two brothers answered, "Sure, we are able."

Jesus then said, "You will drink from my cup and be baptized with my baptism, but it's not up to me to decide who sits at my right and left hand, it's only for those to whom it's been prepared."

Which brings us now to the third reason for Jesus' baptism. Remember Jesus' answer to John's reluctance to baptize him? "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Or my contemporary translation, "It's OK John, let's do this anyway, if only to make these people right with God."

What did I say earlier? "Jesus wasn't baptized for himself, he was baptized for us. Jesus wasn't baptized for his own good, but for our own good."

Here's how. Jesus invites us to be baptized into his death and resurrection. Baptism by total submersion symbolizes the death of our sinful nature. Going under water represents our dying and being buried with Christ; coming back out of the water symbolizes us being raised up from the tomb and into the new life in Christ.

But remember Jesus' warning to James and John, "You will drink from my cup and be baptized with my baptism."

Baptism isn't just a social event or quaint family custom. Sin doesn't magically disappear after mumbling the right incantations. Baptism is all about dying and rising with Christ. Just as Jesus' baptism could only be consummated in his crucifixion, your baptism must be consummated in your discipleship. It's about trusting God with your life, submitting to his will and becoming engrafted into his mystical Body. Baptism enables you to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus.

Something more to consider: just as Jesus' baptism was his ordination to Christship your baptism is your ordination to discipleship. As Jesus became one of us and lived for the least of these, you are called to go and do likewise. God needs you to be salt and light in our dark and perishing world. So work for justice and peace, rise to the occasion whenever God puts in your paths any person or situation that needs tending to. Your baptism, even if it happened when you were an infant, is still God's affirmation and empowerment so you can be and do your best by loving God, your neighbor and yourself.

Maybe you can't remember your baptism, that doesn't matter. What matters is God remembers on that day like Jesus at his baptism, you were enfolded into God's deepest mystery.

I'll close with a story. St. Patrick was baptizing a large and brawny Irish chieftain in a rushing river, when losing his balance, he jammed his staff into the riverbed to keep from falling into the cold water.

As Patrick returned to the riverbank he noticed the Chieftain hobbling on his now bloody foot.

"My goodness!" cried the saint. "What happened to you?"

He answered, "You jammed your staff into my foot when you baptized me."

Patrick sheepishly replied, "Why didn't you stop me?"

The big Irishman said, "I thought it was part of the ceremony. After teaching me about Jesus' suffering and death I figured baptism is supposed to hurt."

Claim your baptism with all its terrible yet glorious implications and remember, your baptism into Christ is your ordination to discipleship. He lives in you, and when you let him, through you. Sometimes it will hurt, but you are always loved, for you are God's beloved child, Jesus is your beloved brother and the Spirit is your beloved friend. That's why you are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.