

## **IMPLICATIONS OF BAPTISM**

**Genesis 3:1-7**

**Matthew 3:13-17**

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**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

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The second Sunday of the new year is traditionally set aside to remember the baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan. Let's review the story. John is busy baptizing people who left their homes and made the long trek deep into the wilderness to hear what the Baptist had to say about God's concern for their spiritual health. Convicted by his preaching many repented and then submitted to his baptism. When Jesus was next in line John was startled and confused saying, "I need to be baptized by you not you by me," only consenting to do the deed after Jesus convinced him it was the right thing to do. After coming out from under the water Jesus was immediately reaffirmed in his decision to be baptized when "suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.'" (Matthew 3:16-17)

I'm sure you can appreciate John's initial resistance to baptizing Jesus, especially since John's was a baptism of repentance. Why would an innocent man agree to be baptized? Of course unlike us, Jesus wasn't baptized for the forgiveness of his sins, he was baptized for the forgiveness of our sins. That's why the voice from heaven proclaimed, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." By submitting to John's baptism Jesus was accepting his Father's will to set the stage for his crucifixion. That's why the Church calendar commemorates his baptism, so soon after Christmas, to link his birth to his death. If you don't understand this, you'll never fully understand Jesus who became one of us to suffer and die for us because God so loved the world.

Remembering Christ's baptism is also an opportunity to remember our own, as well as reviewing why baptism is essential to the Christian life. So let's begin with two questions: "What is baptism?" and "Why do we baptize?"

First, "What is baptism?" Baptism is one of two sacraments practiced by Presbyterians, the other being the Lord's Supper. Christ himself mandated the Church celebrate these two sacred rites when he said, "Do this to remember me" at the Last Supper and "...make disciples...of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." just before he ascended into heaven. From that time on believers and their children have been baptized into Christ and then invited to gather around the Lord's Table, to remember Christ's death and resurrection. In time these two rituals came to be known as sacraments which can be defined as "outward visible signs of God's inward invisible grace." In other words, whenever someone is either baptized or celebrates the Lord's Supper, God's mysterious presence mystically binds that person to himself in ways we can't explain.

The second question: “Why do we baptize?” There are some who claim the unbaptized even infants can’t get into heaven. Presbyterians don’t believe that for a minute. That’s why there’s no rush to baptize newborns in the Presbyterian Church. We reject the horrific teaching that unbaptized infants go to hell because they died in original sin, which is a consequence of our shared fallen human nature. We don’t deny the doctrine of original sin, that is, all are born with the tendency to sin, but we do reject the notion that unbaptized people automatically go to hell.

Then why do we baptize if baptism isn’t an automatic “Get Out of Hell Free Card?” Again, we baptize at Christ’s command as an act of obedience and faith in response to Christ’s baptism which was finally fully consummated on Good Friday. I’ll say it again another way, when Jesus submitted to John’s baptism of repentance, he made his decision to be the Suffering Servant or the Man of Sorrows foretold by the prophet Isaiah almost 700 years earlier. His baptism launched his ministry that would end at the cross.

When we baptize we concede our need to be freed from the power of sin and death. When we baptize we reaffirm our belief that through Christ we are saved. By submitting to baptism we acknowledge baptism is really all about Christ doing what only Christ can do: bridge the gap between God and us so we can know and enjoy God forever.

But, baptism is also all about our being launched into the life of discipleship and purposely I used the word “launch” because I want you to consider this intriguing metaphor for baptism” - the christening of a ship.

Whenever a new ship is ready for service there is a christening ceremony. During this ceremony the ship is named, launched into the water and commissioned into service. Isn’t that what happens at baptism? The one being baptized is named, launched into life and commissioned as one of God’s beloved children. Christian parents promise to bring up their child “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” with the hope that when the child comes of age he or she will confirm the promises the parents made and make their faith his or her own.

That’s why the ship christening metaphor is helpful. Christian baptism gives you the assurance God knows your name. At baptism, you are launched into your life journey with the assurance of God’s blessings and mercies and you were commissioned to be a child of God as well as a brother or sister of Christ. What’s more, just as a ship passes from civil law into maritime or admiralty law, so the baptized person passes from living under the law into living under God’s grace.

Unfortunately, too often baptism has been confused with being a magical rite that frees you from being responsible for the consequences of your sins. In fact, in the early centuries, some people put off their baptisms until they were on their death beds, wrongly believing they could then live their lives with impunity, free from any penalty or

punishment, because a priest could sprinkle a little holy water and wash all their sins away. These people just didn't get it.

Going back to the ship christening metaphor, baptism is a sacred (not magical) rite that names you as one of God's children then launches you into a life of discipleship. You are commissioned and empowered to begin the quest to become as Christ-like as possible, as you submit to your baptism every day of your life.

So baptism marks the beginning of your new life in Christ as you receive salvation through Christ, who himself was baptized to die for your sins. And all this is possible because God loved you even before you were baptized. Remember, our salvation isn't predicated on us coming to God, but God coming to and receiving us as his own. That's why Presbyterians practice both infant and adult baptism. Maybe the infant, unlike an adult, has no idea of what God is up to, but that's OK because God knows what he's up to. God fell in love with you at the moment you were conceived in your mother's womb, God was working in and through you, moving you to faith and salvation. Baptism is really all about what God has accomplished through Christ and what Christ will accomplish through you.

But even though God does all the heavy lifting, we are still called upon to do our part. So the last question I'll ask this morning is this "Do you take your baptism seriously?"

Many people think those of us ordained to the ministry have a more important calling than those who are not. Not true. Through baptism all believers are called to be priests to one another, to build Christian community, nurture one another with faith and love and then to move out into the world to live out the Gospel Christ has given us. Your baptism is your ordination to Christian life and service. Your baptism enables you to fall in love with God, your neighbor and yourself.

So take your baptism seriously, or as Martin Luther said, "Remember your baptism," especially when you're at a crossroad and God is calling you to take the less traveled path and you'd rather play it safe. Remember you are baptized, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." You are baptized to become everything God created you to be and do everything God planned you to accomplish.

Your baptism was the defining moment in your life, whether you remember it or not because what's even more important is that God remembers. So even if you can't remember your baptism, remember Jesus who alone has made baptism possible.