

Christ's Baptism and Ours Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 19: 1-7; Mark 1: 4-11

Just about two and a half weeks ago, we were celebrating Christmas-Jesus' birth- and now- here we are- considering Jesus being prepared for his earthly ministry. There is little recorded in the Bible of Jesus' early life- just a couple of instances- his being blessed in the temple by Simeon and Anna when he was about six weeks old and then his going missing while on a journey with his parents, only to be found in the temple teaching the leaders. It seems that we skip over many years and move rather quickly to the point in Jesus' life where he is ready to begin his ministry. Because it is so easy to get wrapped up in the busyness and chaos of the Advent season AND some relief when it is over, it feels important to have a time when we focus on the Baptism of Jesus as a transition from his birth and youth to his ministry. I believe it is important to move WITH Jesus beyond Christmas as well as remember his baptism- its connection and importance in our lives. We need to think about and tuck in our hearts those realities and their potential impact on our lives.

Generations prior to Jesus' birth, God let it be known through the prophets, that the "chosen one" would be sent to bring justice to a world hopelessly mired in blind waywardness. Our Old Testament scripture from Isaiah 42 makes it clear that the "chosen one" would come to bring justice in a strong, but gentle way. We read, "he will not cry or lift up his voice.... a bruised reed he will not break...he will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth." God promises that the covenant, "I have taken you by the hand and kept you;" – this covenant given earlier will continue. Isaiah, in our morning scripture, predicts eyes that were blind will now be opened, prisoners will be set free and new things will now come to pass.

We are privileged, in the generations since Jesus' birth, to have the vantage point of seeing a broader picture- prophecies in the Old Testament being fulfilled in the New Testament. So, we move WITH Jesus beyond his birth to his preparing for a public ministry- part of the purpose for which he came. The Baptism of Jesus anoints him for that ministry and we through that, are reminded that our own baptism brings us officially into being a part of God's family.

Reference to Jesus' Baptism is found in all four gospels- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John- fairly similar accounts with some variations. Sometimes, as questions or curiosities arise in one reading, we may find answers or possible solutions in another account. For instance:

According to Mark 1, Jesus "came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." A question may arise as we read verse 4 just prior to the baptism account where it states John had been, "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." If Jesus is truly sinless, why did he come to John to be baptized for forgiveness of sins he didn't commit? Mark doesn't give us an answer to that question. However, if we refer to the third chapter of Matthew, we find the account of John asking the same question- why was Jesus was coming to him to be baptized- should it not be the other way around? Jesus response is, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." It seems this may be a clue as to why sinless Jesus needed to be baptized- it seems likely this is one more example of Jesus identifying with the human part of himself by observing the laws and practices consistent with a devoted human life. The Baptism of Jesus is just one more evidence of his humanity, including how he became like us and experienced human emotions. As Matthew records Jesus response to John's question about John baptizing Jesus, we find Jesus stating because of his humanity, he needed to follow the human practices.

As John baptizes Jesus- when they were coming up out of the water, John records that "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." It is also interesting to note- that as we move back to our scripture from Isaiah 42: 1, we find, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights." As the messages from today's readings come together, we find Isaiah peering into a future where God promises to bring goodness out of this world's mess. Isaiah anticipates a transformational moment when eternity stepped into time at the coming of Jesus, and a new world order was born.

Jesus' Baptism marked the beginning of his setting out to do the ministry he was called to do which ultimately was completed through his death and resurrection.

In Mark we find recorded the experience, as he walks out of the water following his baptism, of the heavens being torn apart, the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus and God's voice from heaven affirming God's blessing.

Previously, John's baptism emphasized and involved repentance- people were baptized when they repented from their sins. Now baptism- through Jesus becomes filled with the Holy Spirit and Baptism is forever changed. When we are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, we are baptized also in the name of the Holy Spirit and thus incorporated into the household of God.

Baptism is one of the two sacraments celebrated by the Presbyterian Church- the other being the Lord's Supper. We also believe that we only need to be baptized once and NOT just Presbyterian baptism. We believe that Baptism is the time when God officially adopts us as one of God's own. Many of us cannot remember our own baptism since we were likely quite young, and our parents spoke for us. Those who were baptized when older may be privileged to remember that event. The water sprinkled on the forehead is symbolic of the washing away of our sins through Jesus Christ and is a sign and seal of our membership in the covenant with God. Presbyterians also believe that the entire congregation- the spiritual family of the one being baptized- bears a responsibility for the nurture of the person being baptized. Therefore, Baptism is ordinarily celebrated during a Worship Service when the congregation is present.

The actual water used is insignificant to the action of the Sacrament. While water such as that from the River Jordan may be symbolic to some people, it really adds no importance to the Sacrament, itself. Baptism is God's work, not ours. Salvation is a gift, not our achievement. Baptism occurs, not because WE have come to God but because God first comes to US. Being named as one of God's people, however, is only the beginning. Martin Luther often noted, baptism is a lifelong process of conversion and nurture which begins at the Baptismal Font and does not end until death, until we are at last tucked safely into the everlasting arms of the God who first reached for us in Baptism.

In the Book of Common Worship of the Presbyterian Church, there is a service of Reaffirmation of our Baptism. If we had been able to be together, I would likely

have used that service as a way of taking time to focus on our own baptism- whether we remember it or not. Because we are part of this community of faith, I still want to take a few moments, even though we are separated by location, to prayerfully remember anew God's call on our lives through our Baptism. After the words of that Reaffirmation of our Baptism service, we will, as is our practice at each Baptism, say what we believe using the Apostle's Creed followed by the Hymn, "Baptized by Water" and then the Prayers of the People.

As I read a part of that Service from our Book of Common Worship, I invite you- wherever you are- to prayerfully think about your baptism- if you can remember it, that's awesome. If you were too young to now remember your baptism, be prayerfully grateful for parents who made those promises for you.

Your Baptism- feel drops of water on your forehead, remember promises and commitments made. Listen to the words of the Reaffirmation of Baptism:

"Hear the words of our Lord Jesus Christ: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Obedying the word of our Lord Jesus, and confident of his promises, we baptize those whom God has called. In baptism God claims us, and seals us to show that we belong to God. God frees us from sin and death, uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. By water and the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the church, the body of Christ, and joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice. Let us remember with joy our own baptism...."

We rejoice as we claim again the promises of God which are ours through our baptism. By embracing this covenant of Baptism, we choose whom we will serve by turning from evil and turning to Jesus Christ. May we then reject sin, profess our faith in Christ Jesus and confess the faith of the church, the faith in which we baptize by using the Apostle's Creed.

Karen Houtman 1/10/2021