

Remember Your Baptism January 12, 2014

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM

The great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther was plagued at times by a sense of unworthiness and despair. To drive back those demons, he kept an inscription over his desk that read, "Remember, you have been baptized."

Often, he would touch his forehead and remind himself, "Martin, you have been baptized."

We say that baptism is a "visible sign of an invisible grace." Baptism is our way of reminding ourselves that we are children of grace. We're certainly not perfect, but we are forgiven.

Do you remember your baptism?

Some of you do. Some of us remember the cold water of the river as you were baptized by immersion. Some of us remember the pastor asking about your commitment to Jesus and then pouring or sprinkling water over your head.

You literally saw this day as a watershed moment, a time when everything changed for you. You became a new person, a new creation in Christ Jesus.

But, others here today do not remember their baptism.

Maybe you have a picture of the event, but you were too young to remember. You were an infant and your parents brought you to church to be baptized. On that day your parents promised to take you to church and to teach you the faith. A lot of other people in the congregation that day promised the same thing.

Growing up you saw other babies being baptized and over time you understood the importance of the promise that your parents had made. When you were old enough, you took a class on what it meant to be a follower of Jesus.

And after that class, before the whole congregation, you reaffirmed those promises that your parents made when you were just a baby. You might not have remembered your baptism, but on that day it meant a lot to you.

On that day you knew that God's grace was at work in your life before you were even born. God placed you in a family that loved you and wanted you to know the love of God as revealed in Jesus.

And on this day you realized that this promise had been confirmed. You were a part of God's family.

BAPTISM FORGOTTEN

Of course what I've described are ideal scenarios. Some people never think about baptism again after it occurs.

Some talk about getting the baby "done" as if baptism is some kind of magic rite that assures good luck. After the baptism they very seldom bring their child to church. And the members of the congregation forget about the promise they have made.

Others profess their faith in Jesus and then never come to church or think about what it means to be a follower of Jesus again. They said the right words, but their hearts were not changed.

Baptism has no lasting meaning for them, and it soon becomes an irrelevant, quaint experience, a blip on the radar of their overall lives.

In other words sometimes we forget our baptism.

That's a shame.

Baptism is important.

Baptism reminds us of who we are and whose we are.

Baptism is a sacrament, an outward sign of an inward and spiritual work.

Baptism allows us to look at the world differently.

Baptism reassures us.

Baptism gives us a sense of purpose.

Baptism tells us that God is at work in our lives.

How can we make sure that we remember our baptism? How can we keep the meaning of baptism alive in our lives?

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

The best way to keep the memory of baptism alive and to understand the importance of baptism is to look at the baptism of Jesus. The baptism of Jesus is our definitive guide when it comes to our baptism.

We learn in the passage that precedes our lesson for today that the baptism of John was a baptism of repentance. Normally only converts to the Jewish faith were baptized. They literally took a bath to wash off the pagan influence in their lives.

But, now John was baptizing everyone. Why?

The Messiah was coming. The Messiah would be so much greater than John that the prophet wouldn't even be worthy to carry the Messiah's sandals.

For John the coming of the Messiah meant one thing, judgment. In John's eyes the Messiah was coming to separate the wheat from the chaff, the good from the bad.

Everyone needed to get ready, to come clean and repent of their evil ways. And if they didn't do that the fire of God's judgment would overtake them. (Matthew 3:11-12)

That's what John preached.

Then Jesus came out of Galilee to be baptized by John. Apparently John recognized that Jesus was the Messiah.

And that presented a big problem for John.

John knew that he wasn't worthy. He needed to repent and be baptized every bit as much as the multitudes he dunked in the muddy Jordan River. But, here was the Messiah coming to be baptized by John. It didn't make sense.

John protested. John tried to prevent this.

The Greek word suggests that John wanted to run away from this situation, to separate himself from Jesus. This action didn't fit with John's understanding of baptism and the mission of the Messiah. If anything John needed to be baptized by Jesus.

GETTING DOWN AND DIRTY

But Jesus insisted. Jesus told John, "It's not about you. It's about what God has commanded. Do as I say. Baptize me. Baptism is a necessary first step in my ministry. My baptism will fulfill all righteousness."

Now what did that mean? How does the baptism of Jesus fulfill all righteousness? Why did God want his Son to splash around in the muddy waters of the Jordan with all those sinners?

People might misunderstand. People might think that Jesus was identifying himself with all those dirty sinners.

Well, as it turns out that's exactly what Jesus was doing. Jesus was deliberately lowering himself to the level of sinful humanity. That was the plan from the very beginning.

This is another way to think about the incarnation. This is what it means when we say that God was in Christ.

Jesus emptied himself so that we might be filled. Jesus lowered himself so that we might be raised. The sinless one took on the burden of our sin. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

The baptism of Jesus is a symbolic way of expressing what Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians.

Jesus “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

This is absolutely the opposite of what John expected. This is absolutely the opposite of what everyone expected.

God’s kingdom will not come through a political takeover. God’s kingdom will not come through the judgment of a mighty warrior.

God’s kingdom will come through one who is humble. Instead of judging and lifting himself above everyone the Messiah comes as one who is like us in every way.

The kingdom of God comes through the one who insists on being baptized with the crooks and cheats, and those who know that they better get right with God because their time is running out. Jesus comes to seek those for whom even a bath in the muddy Jordan would be an improvement.

Much to John’s surprise Jesus comes not to baptize with fire. Jesus comes to baptize with grace. Heaven comes to earth.

The kingdom of God doesn’t come from the top down. The kingdom of God comes from the bottom up.

That’s what the baptism of Jesus teaches us.

Righteousness is not born in the pristine waters of achievement and success. Righteousness is born in the muddy waters of the Jordan where desperate sinners come as a last resort.

If we want to meet Jesus, this is where we find Him.

Thank God this is where we find Jesus because this is where we live. We too are desperate sinners without hope except for the grace of God. If God does not come to us in Jesus we have no chance.

But, when we remember our baptism, we remember that this is what God did.

And this is what God still does.

When Jesus was baptized three things happened as he was coming up out of the water.

THE HEAVENS WERE OPENED

First, the heavens were opened.

The gap between heaven and earth has been removed. We learn that God is with us. Like the waters of creation, the water of new birth has come to the world in the person of Jesus.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel far from God. I feel like the distance between heaven and earth is just too great. Today in the baptism of Jesus we learn that is not true.

Baptism reminds us that the heavens have been opened. Heaven came down and glory filled the earth.

And that same glory, that same divine presence is with us today. Remember your baptism and remember that God is with us.

THE SPIRIT DESCENDED

Second, when Jesus came up out of the water the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove.

The same Spirit who created the world is recreating the world through the ministry of Jesus. When we look at the ministry of Jesus, we see the heart of God.

Many people look at the horrible things that happen in the world and ask, "Where is God?"

Christians look at the ministry of Jesus and say, "Here is God."

More than that we believe that we are the body of Christ. We believe that the Spirit of God also descends upon us and enables us to do God's will.

When we remember our baptism, we remember that we have been given the power of the Holy Spirit. God is with us and for us.

The world tempts us to believe that it's hopeless. But, when we remember our baptism, we remember that the hope of God sits on our shoulder.

THE VOICE OF APPROVAL

Finally, when Jesus came up out of the water a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

In his baptism Jesus came down to our level, and God lifted Him up again. God exalted the One who humbled Himself. (Philippians 2:9-11) And in so doing God showed us that the way to true greatness is the way of service.

The Jesuit priest, Henri Nouwen worked in a community that sought to support mentally challenged adults. He said that quite often those people had to put up with voices that said they were a problem, that they were no good, that they were a burden to society.

They constantly heard a voice that said, "If you want to be loved, you better prove your worth."

Many of us know what it means to hear that voice. We often feel like failures. We feel like we have not proved our worth. We are constantly struggling to hear the voice of approval.

But, Nouwen said that we must learn to hear a different voice, the voice that says, "You are my beloved and on you my favor rests."

Jesus heard that voice when he was baptized. And we need to hear that voice as well.

I believe that voice was meant not only for Jesus but also for us. When we remember our baptism we hear a voice from heaven that proclaims, "You are my child. I love you. I am pleased with you."

It is this Spirit inspired voice that enables us to make the difficult choice. It is this Spirit inspired voice that gives us hope when the worst happens. It is this Spirit inspired voice that gives us direction when we are lost.

A NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION

Some folks suggest that the search for identity is a lifelong process ... that we must (as one commentator put it) "root around in the dark recesses of our own egos" to discover who we really are.

But, Christians think that such navel gazing is unnecessary. We don't have to prove ourselves. Who we are is not dependent upon what we do. Our worth is not dependent upon being number one.

Who we really are is given to us at our baptism. For some of us, that occurred not long after our birth. For some of us, it occurred later in life after a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

But, in both cases, baptism was something that was done to us.

We were passive recipients of the water. We were baptized as children ... sons and daughters of the covenant ... in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Our identity is a gracious gift.

I love the opening words of our newest confessional statement, "In life and in death.... we belong to God."

Did you get that?

We belong to God ... not to ourselves ... not to somebody's idea of the good life.... not to our job ... or even to our family. We belong to God.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that you belong to God ... no matter where you are ... no matter what has happened to you?

The church starts each New Year with a Sunday dedicated to the baptism of the Lord. And often on this Sunday (as is happening this Sunday at our church) we ordain and install new officers.

It occurs to me that this is just what we need.

In a time when New Year's resolutions are being made, we begin the year with a spiritual resolution: Remember your baptism.

To officers who are being set aside for a special we work we have a charge: Remember your baptism.

God loves us. God chooses us. We are God's Sons and Daughters. And we have been called according to God's sacred purpose.

Remember your baptism.

Amen.