

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with^[a] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with^[b] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now, this is what the Lord says- he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead.

SERMON

How many times have you heard someone start a conversation with these words, “I’ve heard it said that…” I am famous for that. I’ve been lots of places and listened to lots of people and I read a lot. But my problem is that I cannot remember where I heard certain things or who said it. But, I like to use it as a good opener, so here bear with me:

I’ve heard it said – that many people who leave a congregation do not go anywhere else. They become disenchanted with church and look for any reason to go. They might even say they are considering another church and may go so far as to attend

another church a couple of times. But, for the most part, they just quit. You don't believe it? There's reports everywhere in the news and the printed media that says church attendance is down. It's a national trend. If the population is growing and people are leaving one church for another, why are most denominations feeling the effect of reduced membership and attendance?

Years ago, we all remember how church attendance was a socially acceptable thing whether it meant something or not. I spent lots of time with my grandparents in a small country town in Central Louisiana and church service on Wednesday night was a great place to take your date. Sit in the back row behind some tall people and no one could see you with your arm around her. It was a gathering point. Also, the Christian culture used to be part of our national culture to the extent that much of what we learned about Christianity came from sights and sounds around us, particularly at holiday time.

But, those days are gone. People do not want to give up their time for something that means nothing to them. So, when we talk of baptism, many folks have lost the true meaning of it. There's a lot we do not know about ancient baptism but, we do know that Jewish ritual frequently included the use of water, usually having to do with cleansing and purification. Water and cleansing went together back then like autumn and football do today. These two things lived in the same thought process. The ancient Jews would even bathe themselves after going to the market place.

In 2 Kings, the commander Naaman, who had leprosy, washed himself seven times in the River Jordan at the instruction of Elisha, and was cleansed. In some venues, water was believed to be a healing factor. Historically, Jewish baptism was about cleansing. Before the formation of the Christian church, baptism of Gentiles was required when they converted to Judaism. Baptism by John was meant to be a soul-cleansing new beginning for the recipient. It was to bind one to new life. But, from John, it came with a harsh warning about judgement. More on that later.

So, what do we believe about baptism in the Presbyterian Church? For one thing, we believe there is only one baptism, be it in this denomination or others. We do not consider baptism to be salvific. I thought that was a strange word, first time I heard it. It sounded like a blend of salvation and terrific – salvific. I think that one reason we believe that way is because Jesus was baptized, but, of all people, he was not in need of salvation. Some other denominations place more emphasis than

we do on salvation at the time of baptism. I'm not being critical, just stating a fact. I'm allowed to do that because I was raised and baptized in the Southern Baptist tradition. My father, before he passed away, had lively discussions with me because he believed that immersion was the only way to be baptized. I recently learned that the Presbyterian Church allows three methods of baptism; pouring, sprinkling, and immersion. It is the sign and symbol of inclusion in God's grace and covenant with the church. It signifies God's promise, entry into the church family and becoming one with Christ.

But, getting back to John, let's don't forget, John was the son of a priest and a cousin of Jesus. Who says God doesn't plan ahead? John's future was already decided! No question what his life would be like! His parents knew there was something special about him from before the time of his birth. John had a vision of God's plan. Maybe it was not a clear vision, but he knew something significant was just around the corner. Baptism by John made one ready for the messianic kingdom. He told folks they were not safe just because they were descendants of Abraham. Why did he need to tell them this?

It's like this: when the Jews came home from being dispersed for many years, they knew they would never again be a powerful military and political nation. So, they became a nation of laws. They added details to the Ten Commandments until it became law to the point that the original intent was lost. They lost track of God, swallowed up in rules and John rebuked them for that.

John brought them a message of judgement, a message of bad news. He grabbed their attention like a tent revival preacher and called them a brood of vipers. You will remember Pastor Frank's sermon a couple of weeks before Christmas. His sermon title was 'A Brood of Vipers.' But, Jesus' baptism showed him to be gentle, submissive, and humbling, a man of kind theology. He brought a message of good news. The good news that we are loved.

So, let's look at Jesus' baptism. We find slightly different versions of the story in the three synoptic gospels. Our scripture today from Luke creates a small bit of confusion because the verses we skipped over today say that John was put in prison by Herod. It is as though Luke, the writer, got things a little out of sequence, but that is a minor point. Only in Matthew do we hear John hesitate when Jesus asked to be baptized. He said Jesus should be baptizing him instead. Some

scholars say this was Matthew's way of addressing the fact that Jesus was without sin and did not need cleansing. The Gospel of John does not even mention his baptism. It does mention the Spirit descending on him, but there's no baptism of Jesus. By the way, how many baptisms did Jesus perform during his ministry? Zero. He told his followers to do it. That should mean something to us.

So again, why was he baptized?

Some say that in baptism, Jesus was confessing sin on behalf of the people. Maybe that's a stretch, but I throw it out there for you to think about.

Others say he was endorsing John's ministry, or that he was identifying with the people.

Some say he was foreshadowing his own death, burial and resurrection. But regardless of all these ideas, it certainly marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

I have no doubt you have heard of original sin. Well, this was original blessing. It points us toward God's love if we but remember why we were baptized to begin with. Baptism is the visible sign of God's claim on us and of our beginning in the church. The congregation, at the time of baptism, embraces all who trust in God's grace. It is a sign that we are loved and that we belong to God and to each other. I want to emphasize that - it is a sign that we are loved and that we belong to God and to each other.

At the time of Jesus' baptism, there was the voice of God the Father telling of his approval of Jesus. God's joy at this moment probably equaled His joy at the time of creation.

And that is the main thrust of my sermon today; God says that about us as well. He is proud of us, He loves us dearly and wants us to feel good about ourselves. We are His and those people who have left the church do not realize it. As the Gospel of John puts it, "...the Father will give you another counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."

One of my favorite theological authors is Philip Yancey. He tells a story of his father who died when Philip was only an infant. Philip, as a grown man, would drive a few hours away periodically to visit his aging mother. On one of those visits, she brought out a box of old photos. Going through them, he found one of a small baby and noticed the picture was all wrinkled and worn. He asked who the child was and his mother said that was him as a newborn. He asked why the picture was all wrinkled and she explained. Philip's father died of polio back in the early 50's. Because medical science did not completely understand the nature of the disease, children were not allowed to visit polio patients. Mr. Yancey finally ended up in an iron lung and I'm sure there are those among us who know of that old, gruesome, but life-sustaining machine. It was a large cylinder in which the patient was placed with only his head extending out at one end. A huge bellows on the bottom pumped air pressure in and out around the patient's body, bring air in and out of the patient's lungs. There he lay, day after day, know the paralysis would eventually take his life. Because he could not see his baby boy, Mrs. Yancey brought him a picture, the one Philip was holding in his hands. She wedged it in between all the dials and valves on the machine so her husband could see it. He lay there until his death, just staring at the picture of his infant son. At the moment of hearing his mother tell this, he suddenly realized that there was something, someone, out there somewhere, whom he had never seen, but who loved him dearly. And it reminded him how it was to feel God's love. If you search your hearts long enough, you know that you can have that same feeling.

It is hard to explain, but as the philosopher Pascal said, the heart has reasons that reason cannot explain. You are loved; you belong to someone. Your baptism marks it.

Hear the words of Isaiah again.

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Amen.