

“BAPTISM”

Epiphany, The Baptism of The Lord January 10, 2010
Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29;
Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Introduction:

Today is the Sunday we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus Christ because His baptism marked a turning point in His life and ours. Before His baptism Jesus was like Jimbo Fisher before Bobbie Bowden retired. Jesus was the Savior in Waiting. When He was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him and His earthly ministry began. You could make a case that if Jesus had not submitted to baptism we would not be sitting here today because He never would have gone to the Cross and died for our sins.

Likewise, Jesus commanded His disciples in His Great Commission to, *“go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”* (Mt. 28).

Baptism is therefore very important for us who are Christians. So, this morning I want to highlight some things that Baptism is Not, and some things Baptism Is. First, let's look at what

Baptism Is Not:

Baptism is not a magical action performed through a secret ritual under the cover of darkness.

When you are baptized there are typically not flashing of lightning; a cloud does not descend and cover the Sanctuary; and audible voices are not heard from the Heavens. Yet, something happens to the person being baptized because God has ordained this action take place. It is a Sacrament. It is powerful. It is of God.

When Jesus was baptized with water He also received His baptism by the Holy Spirit. That was God's plan for Him, but that doesn't always happen in that exact sequence for us. You'll discover that God is a God of order not confusion; but God is also a God of variety. God's creative genius allows for great variety.

Sometimes, in our orderly, ritual driven approach to worship we don't allow God to demonstrate His flair for variety. We think something has to be done EXACTLY like we think. For example, the typical church in the Anglican tradition has a baptismal font. It is traditional. It is practical. It is a decorative, sometimes beautiful addition to the church's furnishing; but is also limits the variety in which baptism can be performed.

There are three main ways to baptize someone: sprinkling, pouring, and immersing. A font is designed for sprinkling, and allows for limited pouring. However, it is really difficult to dunk someone in a typical font. Yet, we

Anglican Episcopalians believe in dunking, but we don't provide for it, so it limits that expression of baptism.

Another thing that baptism is not, is a ritual that has to be performed in a building. I dare say that throughout the world these past 2,000 years more Christians have been baptized out doors than within a church building. I was baptized in a muddy creek off the St. John's River in Jacksonville; and if you wanted to be baptized by immersion we would probably be going to one of the local lakes, or maybe to another church with a baptismal tank, or to someone's swimming pool, but it wouldn't happen here.

OK, enough of what baptism is not. Let's talk about

What Baptism Is:

Baptism has a Dual purpose. First, it incorporates us into God's Covenant family; and secondly, it symbolizes the cleansing action of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Jesus didn't need forgiving for his sins, but he did submit to baptism to demonstrate to all who would follow that baptism replaced circumcision as the initiation rite into the new covenant family God was forming through Christ. At eight days old, as was the Jewish custom, Mary and

BAPTISM

Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple to be circumcised, so he was also initiated into God's original covenant family – a covenant tradition that began with Abraham and continues unbroken to this very day in the Jewish faith.

In the new Covenant that God was originating through the actions of His Son Jesus Christ, God also chose a different touch-point, water. In the Old Covenant the cutting of the male baby's flesh produced blood. In the Old Covenant tradition covenants were not made; that is they were not drawn up on paper. They were cut -- into flesh. Sometimes, the flesh was that of a sacrificial animal, and sometimes the flesh was human through the ritual of circumcision; one time, it was the cutting of Jesus' flesh on the Cross. In the New Covenant, God changed the cutting of flesh for water as a way for us to enter into this covenant family.

Water has several properties that are symbolically meaningful for this sacrament. Water quenches thirst – only God can quench the thirst within every human soul that longs to know the meaning of life, and how to find peace within. Water is also an agent in cleansing. We wash our bodies using water. Baptism reminds us that bringing Jesus into our lives will satisfy our soul's deepest longings, and the water of baptism reminds us that Jesus,

through the actions of the Holy Spirit within us, also cleans us up by washing away the stain sin leaves in our soul, our mind, our emotions, our bodies, and our relationships.

Jesus submitting to baptism reminds us this sacrament is ordained by God Almighty, and is important for our spiritual lives. However, within Christendom, there is a wide variety in the practice of baptism: how much water is used; when should a person be baptized; under what conditions; how much preparation; and who is allowed to baptize? The Bible does not give a simple, clear formula for baptism, therefore many practices have risen. Maybe God doesn't want us all hung up over the ritual surrounding HOW to baptize. Baptism itself is the ritual.

In relationship with Jesus when should a person be baptized, before knowing Jesus, or after? It happens both ways. There are people who were baptized as infants and came to know Jesus as their personal savior later in life. There are people who established a relationship with Jesus and were later baptized. There are people who invite Christ into their lives and are baptized moments later. There are believing Christians who have not yet been baptized – maybe even here this morning. God has not established a set pattern for this sacrament. It simply

should be part of a Christian's salvation journey.

On-the-other hand, baptism itself does not save us. Jesus alone saves us. No amount of water can save us, only eventually drown us. The water of baptism reminds us of God's desire to save us, fulfilled in Jesus' action for us on the Cross. But the water itself doesn't save us.

By its design therefore, baptism is a one-time sacrament. Conversely, Communion is a regularly repeated sacrament because its purpose is different. Communion sustains us, strengthens us, feeds us, and puts us personally in touch with Christ, who provides salvation for us. So Communion is regularly repeated, but Baptism is a one-time sacrament.

If someone who was already married filled out an application for a new marriage license, it would be denied. You cannot be legally married the second time if you are already legally married. However, a legally married couple can 'renew' their wedding vows, and many couples do that during the course of their marriage. In fact, on Sunday, February 14th, we are going to have a service of Marriage Renewal, followed by a Reception in the Parish Hall.

What's the value of renewing your wedding vows? It can be a time of refreshing the meaning of your vows, or recommitting yourself to your spouse around those sacred

words. It can be a time for healing a relationship that has been damaged in the adventure of living in a sinful world.

This is also true with Baptism. We don't 're-baptize'. If you have been baptized, you are baptized. Adding more water isn't going to make your original baptism more effective. At your baptism, you were marked by God's Holy Spirit as belonging to Jesus Christ. That mark endures whether you are living it as a disciple of Jesus or not. However, pastorally, I've observed that there are times when people who are baptized want to recommit themselves to the covenant relationship established at their baptism; or they were baptized as small children and they want to remember their baptism. It would be strange – wouldn't it - to be married but not remember getting married. Also, some people wander away from God, or the church, during their lives and then come home again. Re-experiencing their baptism can be a meaningful touch point in that journey.

So,

Here's The Offer Today: If you have never been baptized, and God is moving inside you to get baptized, then it can happen today. As Philip said to the Ethiopian Eunuch, "Here's the water; what is preventing you from being baptized?" I can't immerse you today, if that is your

BAPTISM

desire, but I will make arrangements for us to go where there is enough depth of water to take care of you. Is there anyone here today who desires to be baptized into the Christian faith?

Or, would it be meaningful in your life today to remember, or re-experience your baptism? I'll pour a little water on your head, and say a blessing for you, and you'll have a wet memory.

I invite you to come now for baptism, or to renew, or refresh your current baptism. If you are going to be baptized for the first time, let me know.