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 Baptism of the Lord

## The Power of Baptism Matthew 3:13-17

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be **baptized** by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the **heavens** were opened to him and he saw God’s **Spirit** descending like a **dove** and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from the heavens said, “**This is my Son, the Beloved,<sup>[e]</sup> with whom I am well pleased.**”*

In the book *Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson, 76-year-old minister John Ames writes a letter to his 7-year-old son Robby (to be read when Robby grows up). One day he writes: “*You and Tobias are hopping around in the sprinkler. The sprinkler is a magnificent invention because it exposes raindrops to sunshine... When I was in seminary I used to go sometimes to watch the Baptists down at the river. It was something to see the preacher lifting the one who was being baptized up out of the water and the water pouring off the garments and the hair. It did look like a birth or a resurrection [dying and rising with Christ]. For us the water just heightens the touch of the pastor’s hand on the sweet bones of the head, sort of like making an electrical connection. I’ve always loved to baptize people, though I have sometimes wished there were more **shimmer and splash** involved in the way we go about it. Well, but you two are dancing around in your iridescent little downpour, **whooping and stomping as sane people ought to do when they encounter a thing so miraculous as water.**”*

Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, Picador: New York, 2004, p. 63.

I love the last bit of that: “whooping and stomping as sane people **ought to do** when they encounter a thing so miraculous as water.”

What if that’s how **we responded to our baptism?**

What if that’s how we **remembered our baptism**—with joy and enthusiasm?

We’ve all seen the joy of babies being baptized,  
 but what if we experienced that kind of joy **no matter the age or stage** of baptism?

And what if we *experienced joy*,  
 even if we can't remember our own baptism,  
 but just over the fact that it happened?

I think Jesus would want us to remember and reaffirm our baptism  
 with joy and celebration!

Martin Luther used to look in the mirror each day and say  
 “Remember Martin, you are baptized”.

**Why?**

Because baptism is *who we are*.

It reminds us *to whom we belong*.

Baptism is one of the most powerful things we do as Christians!  
 In our tradition, it's one of only two sacraments—The Lord's Supper and Baptism.  
 Both are *visible signs of God's invisible grace*.

So, your baptism is part of your *identity* as a child of God,  
 as a Christian, as a Christ-follower.

And it is something to *remember and celebrate with joy!*

Baptism is *so powerful for many reasons*.

***Water itself is powerful.***

We can see its power here so close to the ocean,

We have witnessed the strength of that water.

Seventy percent of the earth is covered in water.

Water is a powerful element, and a precious natural resource.

Lack of clean water is a leading cause of poverty and disease.

Water is vital for humans, animals, and vegetation.

In fact our own bodies are made up of 60% water,

so our health and survival depend upon water.

We can live up to three weeks without food, but only three days without water.

Without a doubt, *we need water*.

In the Scriptures, *water is a powerful force of nature and of God's power*.

In the creation story when God creates the heaven and earth,

It says that a wind from God swept over the waters.

That wind is God's Spirit.

Water is a symbol of both *powerful destruction*, like with Noah and the Flood,  
 and *deliverance*, like the Israelites crossing the Red Sea

to escape slavery in Egypt find freedom in the wilderness.  
 In Isaiah 35 and Amos 5 *justice* is referred to as water.  
 In John 4, Jesus refers to himself and the kingdom of God as "*living water*".  
 Workingpreacher.com, Jan 12, 2014, Karyn Wiseman.

The waters of baptism may *not be magical*,  
 (as I was telling the kids), but the water certainly has *power*.  
 And it is *special, because of what we DO with it*.  
 We *pray* over it, we ask the *Holy Spirit* to be in it.  
 Then we use it for baptism, as a sign of *identity, cleansing, and new life*.

*Water IS life*,  
 it is cleansing,  
 and it is a symbol beyond what we can capture in words.

And for those who are baptized, all of this meaning goes back  
 to the *baptism of Jesus*.  
 The baptism of Jesus is our model.  
 All four Gospels contain Jesus' baptism story,  
 but in Matthew there is also a *conversation* between John and Jesus  
 about the necessity of this ritual.  
 In fact, this is the *first time we hear Jesus speak* in the Gospel of Matthew.  
 And what does he say?  
 He says that he should be baptized to *'fulfill all righteousness'*.  
 That word *fulfill* is used by Matthew 16 more times  
 to refer to an Old Testament prophecy being fulfilled.  
 So, for Matthew this is about Jesus continuing the story of God's people,  
 And fulfilling his role as the Son of God.

But John the Baptist is baptizing people for the *repentance of sins*.  
 For him, baptism is about cleansing, forgiveness, and new life.  
*So why would Jesus get baptized by John?*  
 He was without sin. He didn't need to be cleansed or forgiven.  
*But he did want to be our example.*  
 He did want to submit to this powerful rite,  
 as a sign of *humility and solidarity* with the people, with us.

And just as he went for baptism in *humility and solidarity*,  
 We too come in *humility and solidarity* with our brothers and sisters in Christ,  
 When we come to the waters of baptism.

Our tradition *does not practice private baptism*,  
only a public service within the time of worship,  
because this is not just about us, it's about *our whole community*.

It's why *church members take vows* just like the parents of children,  
Promising to help raise that child in the faith.  
It's why we promise adults coming for baptism  
that we will stand beside them and encourage them in their faith journey.  
Baptism is a *communal event*, just as it was for Jesus.

Today, as we celebrate Jesus' baptism,  
We also celebrate *our own*—because our baptism *is so rich with meaning*.

And it's not just about what *Jesus did*—by coming to John at the Jordan,  
It's also about what *happened TO HIM* at his baptism.  
As he is coming up out of the water,  
*suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like  
a dove and alighting on him.*<sup>17</sup> *And a voice from the heavens said,  
"This is my Son, the Beloved,<sup>[e]</sup> with whom I am well pleased."*

All of this harkens back to *Creation*, when God speaks and waters cover the  
earth, when the heavens open and the Spirit hovers above creation.  
What if Jesus' baptism is like *a new creation*?  
It is a new chapter in Jesus' life.

For us, baptism is a sign of our *new life in Christ*.  
Or in the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17: '*anyone who is in Christ is a new  
creation, the old is gone, the new has come*'.  
Baptism is *a new chapter* in our relationship with God.

And what the *Spirit* does is so powerful in this story.  
The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus *like a dove*.  
That's powerful.  
Think about that.  
The dove was the bird Noah sent out after the flood to see if it was all over.  
The dove is a symbol of *peace*.  
God's Spirit does *not descend upon Jesus as an eagle or a hawk*,  
But as a *dove*.  
This is a *different kind of power*.  
This is the power of *peace, humility, obedience, and love*.

Dale Bruner says that this is “*dove-power*”,  
 a downward movement of God, in humility, peace, and gentleness.  
 This is the kind of power we so desperately need in our world today,  
 that glorifies military might and hawkish actions.

<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2023-01-02/matthew-313-17-3/>

When we think about that ‘*dove-power*’ in baptism,  
 We know it means *peace and gentleness in the life of Jesus*.  
 But doesn’t it also mean that in *our lives through our baptism*?

I wonder, do we *humbly consent to be guided by the Holy Spirit,*  
*as baptized believers*?

Or do we continue to insist on our own way of life?  
 Jesus was baptized, as a sign of his *obedience* to God,  
 and his *following* the Spirit.  
 Isn’t *our baptism the same*?

And what if we think about baptism as *a rite of passage*?

The culmination of learning about faith.

After all, parents are instructed in the meaning of baptism before they bring their  
 children (and later they learn their faith in confirmation),  
 youth and adults go through a time of learning and training in the faith before they  
 come to the water.

Similarly, baptism is like a *graduation or an inauguration*—

Because it *launches* us into new life with Jesus Christ.

Just as Jesus’ baptism launched his own ministry.

He went from the Jordan River with John to the wilderness where he was tested,  
 and then he began his public ministry.

So, *baptism is powerful*.

There is a reason we should *remember* it and *celebrate* it!

Even if we were baptized as children, we can put into our hearts and minds the  
 story and meaning of our baptism—for us, today.

We can remember the *power* of it.

We can celebrate the *joy* in it!

Because baptism *brings new life to us---today!*

We too can say every day when we wash our face, like Martin Luther did,  
 ‘*Remember, you are baptized!*’,

because we never want to forget how important baptism is for our faith.

It is *who we are*.

It is a reminder *to whom we belong*.

Just like Jesus, the Spirit says to US,

***“This is my Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased”***

Now I don’t know about you, but I can *always use that reminder*—  
that I am a *beloved child* of God, and God is *pleased* with me, for who I am, not  
what I do, but for who I am.

Friends, your identity is wrapped up in your baptism.

You are *beloved*.

You are *pleasing* to God.

It is who you are.

Your baptism commemorates that.

In the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, with Tim Robbins and Morgan  
Freeman, there is a powerful image of baptism.

Tim Robbins play Andy, who is wrongly convicted of killing his wife.

He consequently spends twenty years as an inmate in the hellish Shawshank  
penitentiary. He does eventually understand that he had a role in her death, and  
after admitting his guilt , he finds freedom, and new life.

His long-planned escape follows immediately after this recognition of guilt.

In his exit from Shawshank, Andy discovers that the large pipe he must enter to  
leave the prison’s walls is a sewer,

and through that flow of excrement he crawls, gagging and retching,

for a half mile, to finally emerge beyond the prison walls into the Shawshank  
Creek, right in the middle of a thunderstorm.

Roy Anker comments that that ***“It is, to be sure, the most spectacular baptism ever  
filmed, both wordless and inexpressibly exultant. From the long sewer pipe he  
spills, into Shawshank Creek amid flashes of lightning and a downpour of  
cleansing rain, tearing off his filthy prison garb and throwing his arms upward in  
laughter and joy. He is washed clean and ventures into a new life, making sure to  
do justice along the way by exposing the horrible Warden.”*** (1:59:28-2:00:34). Story by  
Stephen King, screenplay by Frank Darabont. 142 minutes, rated R. Starring Tim Robbins and Morgan  
Freeman.

Think about that image.

We too go through the garbage of this world,

Emerging into God's *cleansing waters that bring freedom and new life.*

*That IS baptism.*

In our Book of Common Worship is a service to reaffirm our baptism.

This is *not a re-baptism*, but rather a service of *celebration and remembrance.*

We are going to do that right after the sermon today.

We are going to answer once again the baptismal questions,  
and affirm our faith.

We will come to the water with prayer.

You will then have opportunity to come forward if you wish,  
and receive a symbol of the water, and a blessing.

Friends, the *Good news of the Gospel today is our baptism.*

It is a symbol of grace, and joy!

It is our pathway to freedom and new life with Christ.

So—*remember, you are baptized!*

And for that, all God's people can say together, Amen.