

Message: Beginning the journey

Have you been baptized?

Baptism is one of the two sacraments, or means of grace, recognized by the modern church. Our passage from Matthew 3:13-17 is the narrative of what happened at Jesus’ baptism, so it’s a good opportunity for us to look at the sacrament of baptism and what it means to us as we begin a new year together as a community of faith.

If you’re like me, you were baptized as a child. We don’t remember the words that were said, the touch of cold water on our head or the shock of being in public before a group for the first time (*though that may be why so many children cry at their baptism...*). Those of you who were baptized at a later age or as adults probably remember more of what happened. You may remember the words you said, the way water was applied, the location, who was there and other aspects.

Did you feel any different afterward? For some of us, particularly those who were baptized as adults, the sense of being “born again” is probably a strong memory. For others, we may not have strong feelings one way or the other.

Does what we feel make a difference? Another way of asking the question: does our faith depend on what we feel? When we’re baptized, is it important for us to feel God’s love, to walk about happy and filled with a sense of contentment? That’s a rhetorical question. The answer is “no.” Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, “...do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (4:16) and “we walk by faith, not by sight” (5:7). The reality is that some people find joy in their baptism while others feel no change.

John and Charles Wesley are a good example. Charles felt joy and peace when he was born again, while John experienced no change in what he felt. John did have a sense of assurance and peace. Both brothers knew God was present in their lives, even though they had different emotional responses.

Even when our emotions change from moment to moment, our faith in God gives us a firm place to stand. What’s inside of us, our spirit, is the eternal spark which grows into a flame that shines through us. No

matter whether we're happy or sad, content or dissatisfied, healthy or ill, the spirit of faith helps us to believe, hope and love, despite the odds that are often stacked against us. Baptism is a time when we receive God's grace, when our spirit is touched by Christ, when the power and presence of the Holy Spirit first enters our lives.

What is baptism? Baptism is a sign of new life. We're made into a new creation in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. It's a work of grace and it changes us. 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us, *“if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”* We're made into new, spiritual creatures when we're baptized.

Baptism marks our new birth into a life in Christ. It's the beginning of a process God uses to help us have a deeper relationship with Jesus. Baptism is the start of a spiritual journey, where our spirit grows one step at a time. The presence of God's Spirit strengthens, guides and protects our inner being on that journey. Over time, we're more and more able to live according to God's will. We're set apart for the mission of Christ. This is one of the movements of grace in our lives.

We experience amazing things when we're set apart by God.

We experience the presence of the Holy Spirit. We find ourselves willing to yield to the power of God's Spirit in our lives. We listen when God calls and we respond to the “prompting” of the Holy Spirit. We find ourselves more in love with God and our neighbors.

Have you been prompted by the Holy Spirit recently? Perhaps a friend or a family member you haven't thought about in a while popped into your mind out of the blue? Did you feel like calling, texting, posting on Facebook or sending them an email or a note? That's the work of the Holy Spirit, guiding us. That's love in action.

Baptism today is different that the rite John the Baptist performed in the first century. The baptism John offered to the Jews was solely for the purpose of repentance. John's message was harsh: ask God for forgiveness for the way you are and what you do. All you have and are is as a result of sin. That's what makes Jesus' baptism surprising.

Why was Jesus baptized? Why would “*he who knew no sin*” (2 Cor. 5:21) need to be baptized? Jesus had no need to repent and confess sins. John must have been surprised to look up and see Jesus waiting in the line to be baptized. Matthew 3:14 tells us “*John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?’*” John knew who Jesus was. Jesus is the one who “*baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire*” (Matthew 3:11). John was waiting for Jesus to come.

Why did Jesus come to be baptized? Jesus answers the question John (& we) ask in verse 15: “*Let it be so now; for it is proper in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*” That satisfied John and so Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan. Jesus asked and John consented, but there’s more to it than that.

To understand the answer, we have to look at Jesus’ life. Every aspect of Jesus’ life followed God’s will. From his divine conception, his birth in Bethlehem, his childhood in Nazareth to the way he lived, Jesus’ life honored and gave glory to God. We don’t know much about Jesus early years, a private time, but his baptism marks a change.

Jesus is beginning his public ministry. He’s taking up the mission God sent him to do. The first step of that mission is to be baptized. It’s so important that Mark’s gospel begins with the baptism of Jesus; he tells us nothing about Jesus’ birth. That’s one reason why our baptism is important, too. It’s the start of our spiritual journey, as we follow Christ.

There is a reason why it was proper for Jesus to be baptized.

Jesus’ ministry was focused on his people. He was born and raised into a Jewish family and he honored God by fulfilling the Law. Jesus was baptized to identify with the descendants of Abraham and show them he was part of their community. Jesus came to transform the world, but he did it from within. He did everything that was needed to be right with God as a person within a community of faith.

That’s important to us today when so many people are struggling to understand the relationship between their spiritual life and the church. We encounter God in a deeper and more fulfilling way when we are part of a community of faith. We just have to remember we’re not finished with the journey, so we have to bear with one another’s brokenness.

God identified Jesus as His Son by sending the Spirit to descend on him like a dove. God gently and lovingly gave the world their second notice that the Messiah had come. That’s the primary reason why we remember Jesus’ baptism each year. It’s an important reminder that God’s Son is holy, divine, the savior of humanity. God’s only Son has aligned himself with humanity. He came to save us, beginning on the inside. When we’re in relationship with Jesus, we’re in relationship with God and the community of those who love God.

As those who follow the Wesleyan tradition, this has great meaning. The state of our heart and life always involves personal and social holiness, seeking God’s presence in our personal lives, our family and community. We aren’t born to live life alone. We aren’t made to be social or spiritual outcasts, living on the fringes because others make it uncomfortable for us to live openly, freely and willingly in God’s love.

Why should we be baptized? To become part of the community of faith as Jesus did. When we join the community of Jesus Christ, a spiritual family, we come into the presence of God. There are no conditions of human life that would exclude any person from God’s love and the community of faith. Baptism is the doorway to a life set apart for God. It initiates us into a community that expects gifts of grace. It invites us into a community that prays for holiness: that means we’re called to live in a way that’s faithful to the gifts we receive from God. Baptism invites us into a community of trust where doors, hearts and minds are open by the love, faith and hope we share as God’s children.

How do we live out our baptism in a practical way? The words of our baptism show us the way. We live out our baptism through our prayers, presence, giving, service and witness. We resist evil and injustice in all its forms. We seek peace with justice and compassion. We care for others because we love them, not out of a sense of obligation.

Baptism isn’t the end of the journey. It’s the beginning of a lifelong spiritual journey. It’s not an easy path, but it’s a path that leads to deep peace and joy, greater faith and a love that cannot be overcome. Jesus invites all of us to come along.

Will you follow him on the path to eternal life?

Isaiah 42:1-9 (NRSV)

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 3:13-17 (NRSV)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 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. 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. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”