

# REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM

Luke 3:15-22

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The scripture for the second Sunday of the new year is always about the Baptism of Jesus and it's a good opportunity for us to talk about our baptisms, especially since there are numerous notions about baptism needing clarification. For instance, generations ago, many parents wanted their babies baptized as soon as possible because the infant mortality rate was so high. They wanted to make sure their child would get into heaven if the unthinkable happened. Roman Catholics were taught, and many non Catholics believed, if their babies died without being baptized they'd end up in a place called limbo until the second coming. Of course there's nothing in the Bible to back that up. Even so, babies were baptized as soon as possible, just in case.

Another misconception. If you asked someone if he or she was baptized you might get the answer, "I was baptized Methodist or Catholic or Presbyterian." For them, they were baptized into membership of a particular denomination. The better answer would be, "I was baptized into Christ."

The Heidelberg Catechism, written in 1563 is a remarkably warm-hearted confession of faith. One of its questions isn't specifically about baptism but it does lay the groundwork. The question asks, "What is our only comfort in life and in death?" The answer: "That I belong, body and soul, in life and death—not to myself but to my faithful savior Jesus Christ."

Many thoughtful people might question the implications of this statement. "Only the baptized belong to God." Others may conclude baptism is a type of bondage, you have no freedom to speak of because you belong to God and not yourself. But when you carefully read the scriptures you realize God's grace isn't limited to one religion and belonging to Christ isn't such a bad thing. Christ came to bring the assurance of God's forgiveness, protection from evil and the strength to live a good and purposeful life in the world God loves. At the same time, the boundaries of God's Kingdom are forever being expanded beyond any one particular belief system.

Then why is it so important for us to be baptized if God loves people who are not baptized and practice other faiths?

The answer to that question can be found in God's promise to Abraham.

Now the Lord said, “Go from your country...to the land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you...and in you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

Later, God made another promise to Abraham, “Look to the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them...So shall your descendants be.”

Both Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels traced Jesus’ genealogy back to Abraham to make an amazing statement. God’s covenant with Abraham is still binding through Christ and everyone baptized into Christ becomes one of Abraham’s descendants, called to become a blessing to all the nations of the earth. In other words, our purpose in life is to claim our identity as Abraham’s descendants and Christ’s people to bring God’s blessings to the world.

So baptism isn’t just an insurance policy to guarantee salvation. Baptism is a sign and seal of our oneness with Christ in this life and the next. This explains why Jesus was baptized by John. Even though Jesus was without sin he convinced John he still needed to be baptized. “Let it be so now.” Jesus said, “for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” (Matthew 3:15) Simply put, Jesus was baptized to suffer and die on the cross, a very hard commitment for him to make. That explains the voice from above saying, “you are my beloved son, in you I am well pleased.”

“You are my beloved, in you I am well pleased.”

In baptism God affirms our primary identity.

“Who am I?” we ask ourselves especially in hurtful and confusing times. We take some comfort finding our identities as spouses, parents, members of an ethnic group, even our religious affiliations. But these identities are put into jeopardy when your spouse dies or your children grow up and move away, if you lose your job or if your faith is on thin ice. Losing these people or things can lead to an identity crisis. “Who am I now that I’m not this or that anymore?”

Baptism assures us our primary identity that guarantees all the rest is found in Christ alone. Again, the voice from heaven announced, “You are my beloved son, in you I am well pleased.”

Your baptism announces you are a member of the family of God, you are God’s precious child, loveable and valuable. Accepting God’s invitation empowers you to embrace and better appreciate all your secondary identities as a faithful spouse, a loving parent and a member of the human family. Through these relationships God gives you a purpose, to love and be loved, to serve and to be served, to be a blessing to anyone God puts in your path.

All the more reason to remember the promise that you have a place in God's heart and an important role to play in God's world.

Whenever Martin Luther, the Great Reformer, was overcome with doubt and fear in his struggle with the religious establishment of his day, he would repeat the mantra over and over again, "Remember your baptism, remember your baptism."

Most of us here can't recall the day we were baptized because most of us were infants. Maybe your parents told you about your baptism or showed you pictures with you in your christening gown being held by your parents and grandparents. I have seen pictures and I was told something about my baptism when I was about seven years old that unnerved me. Apparently, the priest baptized me with the name Howard instead of Harold. It made me wonder if when I approach the Pearly Gates, St. Peter might look in the Lamb's Book of Life and say, "Sorry, I have a Howard Cahill but no Harold Cahill." You'll have to wait over there and hope we straighten this out."

Anyway, remembering your baptism isn't about recalling the day, it is about remembering and claiming your core identity. You are affirmed as God's son or daughter, a descendant of Abraham, a disciple of Christ, a child of blessings. Remembering and claiming your baptism motivates you to respond in kind to become the best you can be for God and the people around you. Through baptism, you are in God's grip and God will never let go.

Finally, remembering your baptism means dying with and being raised up with Christ. The world as it is now is far from God's original plan when he said, "Behold it is very good." Why else would Jesus tell his disciples, "Be in the world but not of it." But like it or not it's hard not to be "of it." The world tells you to discover who we are and then run with it without considering that maybe who you are, on your own isn't who you really should be. "Embrace your inner child," we are told. But what if your inner child is a spoiled brat?

Our baptism encourages us to center our lives in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through the scriptures and being in the beloved community we get a sense of God's presence and are encouraged to be in sync with God's will. We learn to be good stewards of our time and talents. We try to be kind and gentle and when need be, strong and fierce. We endeavor to give our money sacrificially and cheerfully. Above all we learn to surrender our pride and become humble. Surrendering our pride and becoming humble is essential. Otherwise we become latter day Pharisees hiding behind the mask of self-satisfaction and fearful someone might rip it off and expose our inner fears and foibles.

Now you understand why in his weakest moments Luther would repeat over and over, "Remember your baptism." Baptism isn't a magical rite sealing your passport into heaven, baptism is taking leave of your old way of life to be embraced by the new.

In our country baptisms happen all the time, it's just something Christians do. But in other countries, where Christians are a minority and sometimes persecuted, baptism is a bold statement. You identify yourself as someone outside the norm, even counter cultural. It can also be dangerous. In these countries our Christian brothers and sisters are truly brave witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the call to be a blessing to all the nations and tribes of the earth.

Today when we baptize Charles and hear him accept and claim the promises and responsibilities of Christian discipleship, remember your baptism and resolve to surrender yourself to the ministry of reconciliation and hope we have been given. Remember you are a child of God, a descendant of Abraham and a disciple of Christ and then, live your life accordingly in your neighborhood and beyond.