

BAPTISM
Isaiah 43:1-7 ~ Luke 3:15-17; 21-22
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 13, 2013

Every year, on the First Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany, the Church remembers one of the defining moments in the life of Christ, his baptism in the River Jordan.

If you were here last Sunday, you heard the word “epiphany” means “to make known or to reveal.” On the Twelfth Sunday of Christmas, Christ was made known to the Gentiles through the visit of the Wise Men, the first non Jews to encounter and worship the child of Bethlehem. This revelation is significant because it foreshadows the Gospel of Christ busting down the boundaries separating the Jews from non Jews, God’s unexpected way of fulfilling his promise to Abraham that his descendants would multiply and be a blessing to all the nations. Through Christ this promise was kept.

Christ’s baptism wasn’t any less insignificant than our own baptisms. Unfortunately we usually take our baptisms for granted, especially since most of us were too young to either remember or understand why baptism is essential to our identity as God’s children and Christ’s brothers and sisters.

You see, baptism is so much more than family tradition or a naming ceremony. It’s not just something religious people are expected to do. Then why do we do “it if not to just get the baby done?”

Before trying to answer these important questions, let’s first consider the origins of baptism and how it evolved into what it has become.

First this: the Jews never practiced baptism. Their rite of passage into the faith community was circumcision, which took place, according to the Law of Moses, eight days after the child’s birth. Circumcision guaranteed the infant’s inclusion in the Covenant (or contract) God made with Moses, “I will be your God and you shall be my people.”

But while they didn’t practice baptism, Jews did observe cleansing (or purification) rituals through immersion into naturally sourced pools of water called mikvahs. These ritual immersions were required for Gentiles who converted to Judaism as well as practicing Jews who became ritually defiled through contact with “unclean” foods, or even by brushing up against an unclean person. It was from these purification customs the sacrament of baptism emerged.

The first mention of baptism in the Bible is reported in Mark’s report of the ministry of John the Baptist. John didn’t baptize using the formula “in the name of the

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” instead his was a baptism of repentance and preparation, in anticipation of the Messiah’s sudden appearance.

That explains John’s initial reluctance to baptize Jesus. When Matthew reports the conversation between the two John said, “I need to be baptized by you and...you come to me?” Jesus replied, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness. (Matthew 3:14-15)

By submitting to John’s baptism this rite of preparation and purification was suddenly transformed into something more mysterious and wonderful than can ever be explained. Here’s why: Jesus’ baptism was an act of submission to his Father’s will that would set Jesus on his journey to the cross.

We get a hint of the full implications of Jesus’ baptism in his conversation with two of his disciples, James and John, who privately requested that when the time came one would sit on his right and the other on his left when Christ came into his glory. Jesus’ blunt response: “Are you able to...be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38)

In saying this Jesus revealed his baptism would be consummated in his crucifixion. Obviously John and James were both totally clueless. Only Jesus, completely innocent of any sin, could ever accomplish the mission he alone was born to carry out.

And what did Christ’s crucifixion entail? Suffering of the most terrible kind caused by him taking unto himself all the sins ever committed which brought about his total separation from God.

Of course we can only speculate about the intensity of his suffering and truth be told, we really shouldn’t want to know because it would be too painful and overwhelming to bear. Even so, we need to know Christ’s baptism into his passion and death was done for you and me as well as everyone else who ever lived and ever will live. On the cross Christ took our punishment so we could be spared what he endured.

Why? Why did God set it up this way? Since God is God, couldn’t he find a less terrible way to win our salvation. That question is one of the mysteries shrouding the crucifixion. All we can answer is that God’s decision to love is only equaled by his need for justice. There’s no cheap grace. Someone had to pay the price. Isn’t that why the Word became flesh and lived among us, knowing all along his own people would reject and despise him?

Up to now we’ve covered the origins and, as much as humanly possible, the significance of Christ’s baptism. Now it’s time to move on to try to grasp why it’s essential we claim our baptisms.

It's been said that whenever Martin Luther, the German monk who triggered the great Reformation in 1519, was feeling overwhelmed by his limitations he'd repeat the mantra again and again, "Remember your baptism, Remember your baptism, Remember you baptism."

As far as Luther was concerned his baptism was the foundation of his life. He believed his baptism was even more important than his ordination because in the sacrament of baptism we're given the most significant name of all, "Christian," literally one who bears or carries Christ.

I read once after it was determined the Titanic would sink within a few hours, Captain Smith gathered his officers together and after giving each man his instructions, realizing the intense stress they'd all be under, he gave his final command, "Remember men, be British."

In other words, remember our traditions, heroes and mentors who provided us with our sense of being and purpose. Remember your call to action and duty. Do your best, if necessary sacrifice yourself so others may live. "Be British."

Through Christ we have a higher calling, "Be Christian!" Remember your baptism especially when you're being tempted by Satan or tested by God. "Be Christian," defy Satan and instead call on God to reaffirm your strength. Be Christian, claim your baptism so your old self can be crucified with him, and then, be raised up with him. Especially during times of trial and crisis "Be Christian."

When your parents presented you for baptism, or as an adult you presented yourself, chances are they or you didn't fully grasp the implications or ramifications of baptism. Even so, it's now our responsibility to consider these things if we're going to take Jesus and our discipleship seriously. Baptism isn't a quaint custom, it's a contract between God and ultimately yourself.

I'd like to close with a story that you may remember from a sermon I preached on baptism several years ago. It's a wonderful story illustrating how the sacrifice Christ made for us impressed one man on the day of his baptism.

A Celtic Chieftain, after hearing St. Patrick, the Apostle to the Irish, preach the Gospel of Christ asked to be baptized. They went to a river and waded into the flowing water. About to lose his balance, Patrick plunged his staff into the rocky river bed and proceeded to baptize this man by dunking him into the water.

After coming back on land, the Saint noticed this big brawny man wincing with pain as he hobbled on his bloody foot.

"Good God man, what happened to your foot?" Patrick asked.

Nonplused, the Chieftain replied, “What do you mean what happened? You stabbed my foot with your staff.”

“Oh my Lord, I’m so sorry, why didn’t you say something?”

The big Irishman sheepishly replied, “Well it’s like this. After what you told me about Jesus dying on the cross, I thought it was part of the ceremony because baptism is supposed to hurt.”

The man got it right, baptism should hurt, but remember Jesus said, “Deny yourself, pick up your cross, follow me.”

In short, “remember your baptism” and “be Christian.”