

# Rediscovering Baptism

## Baptism of Our Lord

January 7, 2018

There is so much we don't know about the baptism of Jesus.

We do know a little. We know John baptized many people. We know it was a baptism of repentance. We know he saw his baptism as a prelude to what would come next. We know he dipped people down into the water. Matthew's gospel tells us John was hesitant to baptize Jesus but Jesus said, "Let it be so for now." We know that when Jesus came up from the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove and he heard a voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

But we don't know the words John said as he baptized. We don't know if the people being baptized made particular promises. We don't know if John dipped people forward or backward. We don't know if people wore clothes. We don't know if there was preparation or instruction for John's baptism. We don't know if there was any follow up or discipleship.

So it is interesting that baptism became the central rite of the Christian faith. Christians celebrate Eucharist far more often, but baptism is the act that sets us apart as Christian people. The early church could have chosen something else as the central, identifying act. Jesus laid hands on people and healed them. Maybe the church could have simply laid hands on people and prayed to welcome them into the faith. Jesus once made a little mud and put it on the eyes of a blind man to make him see. Maybe the church could have done that. Jesus went fishing with his disciples. Maybe the central initiation rite of the church could have been a big fishing trip, which would make a lot of people happy.

But baptism – dipping people in water or pouring water on their heads – became the action that launches the Christian journey for every Christian on the planet since the time of Jesus as we heard in Acts today.

In these weeks after the Epiphany, we are exploring the two central sacraments of our faith – Baptism and Eucharist. They both started with Jesus. He was baptized by John in a river. He shared a Passover meal and said, "This is my body. This is my blood." That's where it all began. After Easter and the Ascension the church kept doing these things. They found that the Spirit of Jesus met them in these holy actions. A pattern developed. Different churches in different places at different times adapted the pattern. Still today, the things we say and do in Baptism and Eucharist have rich meaning. I'm inviting us to explore that meaning over the next few weeks.

Because this is the day in the church year when we remember the Baptism of Jesus, we start with Baptism.

So take your prayer books. Turn to page 298.

These are the instructions for baptism. We never read these out loud during a service, but they are significant, so I want us to know what they say. Look at that first paragraph.

*Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church.*

Full initiation. That's why we offer communion to babies as soon as they have been baptized and can eat. They are fully initiated members of Christ's body. That's why we don't baptize you again if you were baptized in another church. Even if you've been away from the faith for awhile and are coming back and want to recommit we don't baptize again.

*The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.* Nothing breaks this. No matter what.

*Holy Baptism is appropriately administered within the Eucharist as the chief service on a Sunday or other feast.* There was a time when baptism took place in private chapels or when families might schedule private baptisms, but we don't do that anymore. This is something the whole body celebrates together.

*The bishop, when present, is the celebrant.* The bishop is the overseer of the church in a particular region. Initially, the church in a region was just one community, or maybe a few communities, but not dozens or hundreds. There was the church in Rome and the church in Corinth and maybe several churches in the region of Galatia but not what we think of today as multiple churches in a single city. So bishops did all the baptizing. In the early days, baptism was always on Easter. People spent up to three years learning what it means to follow Jesus. When they were ready, Lent was a time of intense final preparation. Then on the night before Easter, the church would gather to read scriptures and pray. As the sun came up on Easter morning, the bishop would baptize.

As the church grew, there came to be more Christian communities within a region. The bishop could not be everywhere at once, so priests began presiding at the sacrament on behalf of the bishop. But we still recognize we are all linked together in baptism. Every year during Holy Week, Bishop Wright blesses the oils we use for anointing at baptism. Every church in our diocese uses the same oil as part of sharing the same baptism, following the same Jesus, receiving the same Spirit. We are all in this together.

So look at pages 299 and 300. The service begins much like a Sunday Eucharist. We read the scriptures for the day. We hear a sermon. Then we gather at the font.

For a time in Christian history fonts were in separate buildings or in small side chapels set up for private baptism. But in the 1950's and 60's many Christians around the world started rethinking a lot of worship practices. This was based in part on the rediscovery of some early church documents and practices. Vatican II in the Roman Catholic Church was one result. The prayer book we still use was another. As part of recognizing how central baptism is to our life as Christians, we started at this time putting fonts front and center, by the entrance and preferably in

line with the altar. As soon as we enter this space, we are invited to touch the water and remember our baptism. Technically, we should gather in the back at the font for baptism. But here, we're practical, so we move the font to the front so everyone can see.

On page 301, the candidates for baptism are presented. The presenters of children are their parents and godparents. The presenters of adults are sponsors. But the idea is the same. We never come to baptism alone.

On page 302, the candidates and parents and godparents and sponsors all promise to renounce Satan and turn to Jesus. This is close to the language the church used in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. And this one of the places where our baptism is at lot like like John's baptism of repentance. Repentance is more than feeling sorry for something we've done. Repentance is orienting our lives around God's will. Repentance is turning aside from all that draws us from the love of God and turning to Jesus. In the early days, people would actually turn around at that moment. They would start at sunrise on Easter facing the darkness. As they promised to turn to Jesus, they would physically turn around and face the rising sun. Baptism is a lifelong turning to God. What we do in this moment grounds us in a lifetime of reorienting our lives around the love of God.

Then the congregation joins in. We promise to do all in our power to support those who are being baptized in their life in Christ. On page 304, we share in the Apostles Creed, an early statement about what Christians believe. In 1979, when this prayer book was published, our church added five more promises to describe what the Christian life is like. All of this – what we believe and what we practice – are our baptismal covenant. We make these promises knowing God will help us accomplish them.

Then we pray. On page 305, we pray for those being baptized. And on page 306, we pray over the water. We remember the water of creation, the water of the Exodus and freedom, and the water in which Jesus was baptized.

And here is the amazing thing about water. Water is always being recycled. It falls from the clouds as rain and rises up again as clouds. The atoms and molecules that make up water do not go away. They just move around. It is entirely possible that some of the water in our font was present on the first day of creation and in the Red Sea as the Israelites passed to freedom and in the Jordan when Jesus was baptized.

So in a way, all water is holy, but we ask God to bless this water and make it a vehicle for cleansing and new birth. We baptize in the name of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We anoint with oil by making the sign of the cross and saying you are marked as Christ's own for ever. And though we may not see the heavens open or hear a tangible voice, in that moment the truth Jesus heard becomes part of us. You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased. You are sealed with the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

This is baptism. Baptism does not make God love us more. God already loves us as fully as possible. But baptism grounds us in that love forever.

We just baptized two children a few weeks ago, so we don't have candidates scheduled for baptism today. But on this day as we remember the baptism of Jesus, let us renew our own baptismal covenant.

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