

## *Sharing In Christ's Baptism*

Matthew 3:13-17

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One thing you'll notice in this morning's text from the Gospel According to Matthew, is how John the Baptist is surprised when Jesus shows up to the Jordan River. John is reluctant to baptize Jesus; it is as if the President of the United States is offering to shine the shoes of his shoe-shiner, when normally it should be the other way around. John is taken by surprise at Jesus' request to be baptized.

Perhaps one reason that John is surprised would be that John's baptism was a baptism of repentance; certainly he wouldn't expect the Messiah whom he was announcing to have need of repentance. So John is taken aback when Jesus appears at the river to be baptized. Here was John, proclaimed by Scripture as the forerunner of the Messiah, suddenly realizing that he was in the presence of the One to whom he was the forerunner. "Jesus, you should be baptizing me, and not the other way around," says John.

But Jesus prevails: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."<sup>1</sup>

Let it be so now, says Jesus. Why would Jesus insist on being baptized? Why would the Son of God feel the need to submit to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? There are at least three reasons for Jesus' baptism.

The first is the reason Jesus himself states: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." The baptism of Jesus is the will of God. For Jesus to submit to the baptism, and for John to carry out the baptism, is an act of devotion and obedience to the will of God; it fulfills all righteousness for them to do so. "Let's do this," says Jesus, "because my Father tells us so."

The second reason that Jesus is baptized is that his baptism serves as his ordination and installation. Jesus is baptized, and then the Spirit descends upon him, and he is identified and set apart by God: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."<sup>2</sup> This passage marks the end of the third chapter of the gospel written by Matthew; but the fourth chapter continues the narrative with Jesus going out into the wilderness, where he is tempted by the devil, and then Jesus will gather his disciples and wander the Judean countryside teaching and healing and upsetting the status quo.

The baptism is the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

For many people, baptism is an end in itself. Either people think they've done everything they need to do in order to be saved, and baptism is the exclamation point on their salvation; or, some think that they can't be baptized until they have their act together, so they put it off and they put it off, with the excuse that they have some things they need to get straightened out before they can be baptized.

In fact, during the early centuries of the Christian church many people put off baptism for precisely that reason. They misunderstood the capacity of the Christian church to declare forgiveness of sins committed after baptism, so they delayed their own baptism until they felt

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:15

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3:17

they had gotten sin out of their system. One author said that many “preferred to postpone baptism at least until the passionate time of youth was over.”<sup>3</sup>

But Jesus shows us that baptism is not the end; rather, it’s the beginning. Baptism is the inauguration of Jesus’ public ministry. You don’t wait until you have your act together to get baptized. Rather, you recognize that when you are baptized, you are just beginning your life of following Christ—a life that will be filled with peaks and valleys, moral advances as well as moral failings.

This morning we observe the ordination and installation of our new class of elders. Ordination and installation is in no way an indication that any of us has “finally arrived,” as if we’re really just conferring a special status upon ourselves. No, ordination and installation is a call to service. It’s just the beginning. And for those of you who are rolling off of Session, your ordination doesn’t end after three years—you have been enlisted into perpetual service of your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The call to service, the call to participate in the ministry of Jesus Christ, is not a call reserved simply for those who are elders and ministers in the church. It is a call for all who are baptized, because all who are baptized with Jesus are joined to him in the ministry of love and justice and reconciliation and salvation. To remember Jesus’ baptism is to remember our own, and to remember our own baptism is to be reminded of our call to service and ministry.

In his baptism, Jesus fulfills all righteousness. And in his baptism Jesus reminds us that baptism is the beginning, not the end, of a lifetime of service and devotion to God.

The third reason for Jesus’ baptism is that in his baptism Jesus identifies himself with you and me and our condition. The Bible tells us that people were flocking to the wilderness to be baptized by John. They were going to the Jordan River to be baptized because they were acknowledging that their lives were messed up, that they needed a fresh start, that they needed God’s mercy and forgiveness.

In our own baptism liturgy, we ask those being baptized (and in the case of infant baptism, we ask the parents presenting the child for baptism) if they reject sin. We ask this question: “Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?” It’s not a question that asks if we promise that we will never sin anymore, because that would be a promise that none of us could keep. But it is a reminder that before we embrace the gospel that saves us, we need to recognize and turn away from the destructive forces from which we need to be saved. Renunciation is a vital part of repentance.

When Jesus joined in this very same baptism, he publicly demonstrated his solidarity with us. You see, in Jesus Christ, God comes to us. He joins us in this world. He joins us in our condition. He walks in our shoes; he faces the same world that you and I face; he is tempted just as you and I are tempted; he experiences the pain of rejection that we all keenly know. He engages in the same battle against sin and evil that you and I face every day.

But here’s the difference: Jesus joins with us, not from a position of weakness, but from a position of strength. He comes among us and walks with us, not to succumb to our condition, but to overcome our condition and to redeem us from our sin. In his baptism, Jesus proclaims that he takes our sin seriously, and he enters into our predicament so that he can do for us what you and I cannot do for ourselves. Jesus is not repenting, but he is renouncing sin; and in his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus will prove victorious for us over our sin.

In a few moments we will observe the Lord’s Supper. During that sacrament, we are reminded that Jesus took his baptism seriously. In his baptism Jesus proclaims his identification

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<sup>3</sup>Edward Yarnold, *The Awe Inspiring Rites of Initiation* (London: St. Paul Publications, 1971), p. 7.

with us and his commitment to save us from our sins; in the Lord's Supper Jesus proclaims that he was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice that his baptism demanded—he gave his life for us.

In his baptism he joined himself with us. He lived the life we live. In our baptism, and whenever we observe the Lord's Supper, we are reminded that we are joined to Christ. Just as he shared in our lives, so do we share in his life; just as he shared in our death, so do we share in his resurrection and new life.

It's his beginning. And it's ours, too. Let it be so now. Amen.