

Pastor Kevin Garman  
Theme: Baptism  
Scripture: Luke 3:15-22  
Baptism of Our Lord Sunday January 9th, 2022

*Last week we celebrated the beginning of the season of Epiphany, but this week following the Epiphany story, we look to the story of Christ's baptism. Throughout the Epiphany season, there are three epiphanies that take place during this season, which are the Magi following the star, Christ's baptism, and the Transfiguration of Christ just before the beginning of Lent. Our theme today is remembering our baptism and the importance of baptism in our lives.*

*If you're not careful, then you may miss Christ's baptism in the Gospel of Luke. Mark and Matthew's gospel put much more of an emphasis on Christ's baptism as Mark's gospel opens with the baptism and Matthew's gospel places more of an emphasis on John the Baptist preparing the way for Christ.*

*As many rules and regulations the church has around baptism, you would think we would have a pretty clear understanding of how Christ's baptism took place, but we don't. Was Christ immersed in water or was water sprinkled on him? We don't know. What liturgies were used? We can only speculate off of incomplete primary sources. What was the importance of Christ being baptized and why did he want to be baptized? We don't know because there could have been several reasons Christ thought it was important. Regardless of how it took place, many scholars and clergy would consider this the moment where Christ became divine and not simply just human. God speaks to Christ and almost blesses him in the way God blesses each day of creation. It's almost like it is Christ's initiation into his mission of the gospel.*

*Just like last week we ask, What's the purpose of this story being told today? I would offer us this explanation this morning. Christ went to John to be baptized because Jesus understood he must enter the messiness of life in the world he wanted to help and liberate. For him to fully achieve this goal, Jesus had to become one with his people, their customs, their schedules, their routines, and their very lives. How could Jesus preach a message of repentance if he didn't repent himself? How could Jesus preach to the needs of Judea if he didn't walk, talk, eat, sleep, and breathe in the very cities and towns his people lived? It was in this moment where Christ understands he*

*will carry out his mission of the gospel with fortitude, with compassion, and without looking back, he and his companions would set out to change the material and spiritual lives of those around them. Just like he eventually carries the cross, Jesus understands he must carry on with the sins of the world on his shoulders, and baptism was his initiation. (This italicized section was put into my own words from UMC Discipleship's preaching notes for January 9th, 2022)*

As we have talked about before, each of the synoptic gospels have a specific theme and narrative the author is attempting to convey. In Mark, Christ is the suffering martyr who has come to die for us through his service to his neighbors. In Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses, the promised Messiah, and descended from the lineage of the great King David to bring justice and righteousness to God's people. In Luke, Jesus is a prophet of the people walking among them and feeling their pain, which is why the Gospel of Luke is sometimes referred to as the social gospel, not to be confused with the 20th century movement in religion called the social gospel. We see this in the opening lines of today's verse.

*"As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah"* (Luke 3:15 NRSV). These were the opening words of Jesus' baptism. Jesus isn't even the focal point of the story yet. The focus is on the thoughts and meditations of the people. All those gathered there were beginning to wonder if John the Baptist was the Messiah and John makes it clear in the next verse; John is not the Messiah but the one who has come to prepare the way. John makes a specific distinction as well because he claims he baptizes with water, but the one whom he is preparing this repentance for will arrive and baptize with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Verses 18-20 provide a different story than the other gospels. John begins preaching the good news to the people following his proclamation that he is not the Messiah. That's interesting. What is the good news? The Greek word this phrase is translated from *euangelion*. There would be other words that would branch off of this word, but it was typically used in Rome to speak about the divinity of the emperor (Hear the good news that Emperor Augustus has decreed...) and used to celebrate a victory (Hear the good news, the Gaulish barbarians have been defeated by the hand of the great Julius Caesar). In short, it was a propaganda word of sort because anything the Roman empire would declare as good news was seen as bringing good tidings or proclaiming it was a victory. So this is why John the

Baptist is imprisoned and eventually beheaded because he was proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. To a good Roman citizen, this would be reported as blasphemy and an insurrectionist attempt to declare the Roman empire, thus the emperor, was not the highest authority in the land.

Even though John the Baptist has been imprisoned, it does not matter to the people gathered there. They are all still baptized and Jesus is baptized with them. Following his baptism, Jesus begins praying with the people there. At this moment, the heavens open up, the Holy Spirit descends, and the word of God is spoken by saying, "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" This concludes the story of Jesus' baptism.

Not all of us remember our baptism, but I remember mine in the Holston River just within sight from our backyard. It was a warm August day in Tennessee and I was about twelve years old. I had spent the last several weeks with my sister Megan in confirmation classes speaking about the importance of various Methodist policies, traditions, histories, and beliefs, but today was a special day. In fact, I had been waiting for this moment for a long time. My baptism was important to me for two reasons. One, it was a moment of transformation. I wanted to leave behind the pain and trauma of my parents divorce, my father's abusive words, and my family's lack of support. I wanted to start life afresh with a newness and appreciation for life again. I wanted someone to prove to me that this God I had learned so much about cared about even me.

My baptism was also important to me because I saw it as a final welcome from my church home as I fully became one of them. I remember looking out at the pastor as he recited the words waist deep immersed in the water of the Holston River. He welcomed me to step out and I remember the cool water rushing through my toes and sending that cold shock up through my body but that didn't matter. What mattered was my sister was being baptized with me, my mother was proud of me, my grandparents were taking photos, and my church family was overjoyed to welcome me as a new member of the community.

The rest happened pretty quickly. The liturgy was finished, I was dunked back in the river, and I rose up from the probably chemically contaminated water of the Holston River refreshed, renewed, and feeling transformed and rejuvenated by this ritual and this new identity I was about to embrace. I remember most distinctly the Bible I received following my baptism because that summer I would nearly read the Bible from cover to cover skipping over some parts I thought were boring or topics that didn't

interest me, but the important part was I left behind that day my pain and trauma caused in my life before me. That doesn't mean I don't feel that pain, I don't reminisce on what could have been, or that I simply "forgave and forgot," however, it was a moment where I realized my past was no longer going to define me and my future. Christ gave me that confidence. Christ showed me that love. Christ taught me that day that I was enough, I was valuable, and I was loved and forgiven by someone who wasn't a family member. I would never see life the same again.

You don't have to remember your baptism to understand its impact and significance to your life. You don't have to understand everything with baptism to grasp why it is important. Technically speaking, you don't have to have any special words announced at your baptism for it to have purpose and meaning in your life. Your baptism is a moment where you are welcomed as a part of the Beloved community and God sees you, just as you are, perfectly in the way God created you. You may not even be able to see the beauty, the wisdom, the fortitude, and the strengths you possess, but God sees them, blesses them, and calls them good.

As we remember our baptism today, let us be reminded through Christ we are welcomed into a new life, new perspective, and new beginning. It is free for all who wish it, but make no mistake, it is a life-long journey for as long as you may live. Discipleship is not an easy road to follow, but Jesus reminds us through this story in the Gospel of Luke that we are never alone in this journey. We always have a friend, neighbor, or colleague we can reach out to for help, support, encouragement, and vision. We are the Body of Christ. Throughout the rest of our time before Lent, we will be exploring this idea of the Body of Christ.

In conclusion, hear the good news today. You are loved. You are enough. We welcome you. We will change the world together one day at time with compassion, justice, love, and determination for a better world within our hearts, our actions, and our service to others. We are the Beloved community, whom God smiles at and says, *"You are my [Children], the Beloved; with [each of you] I am well pleased."* Amen.