

Baptism of the Lord (Year A)

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

As we continue this journey talking about “Gifts That Keep On Giving,” our next step is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. This is one of my favorite stops on the liturgical calendar. Baptism is one of the two sacraments we observe in the Presbyterian Church and I feel like sometimes it doesn't get its due attention. Mostly this is because we observe Communion, the other sacrament, at least once a month, so *that* sacrament is naturally built into the rhythm of our worship lives.

But Baptism, unfortunately is something that we don't talk about as much or seem to consider with the same intentionality. Sadly, in the more than five years that I've been a pastor, I've only baptized one person, a child who wasn't even a member of the church I was serving at the time. This congregation hasn't seen a baptism since before I arrived here as your pastor. Which means that it's important that we remind ourselves of the theology of baptism because without it our faith is empty.

Which is why I'm grateful that we observe Baptism of the Lord Sunday every year on the Sunday after the Epiphany. In the Presbyterian Church, we tend to emphasize infant baptism. While I was not technically baptized as an infant, I was young enough that I didn't remember it. I was baptized at the age of four on June 28th, 1992 by Rev. Jim Holderness at First Presbyterian Church of Dalton, Georgia. I grew up in a sea of southern baptists who all seemed to remember vividly the event of their baptism. Because they were baptized at an older age, they could remember what they wore, what the weather was, how cold the water in the pool, lake, or “crick” was, and what they had for lunch after the service. I was often jealous of them because I had absolutely zero recollection of my baptism. However, I eventually learned to leave my envy behind when I was once told that because I didn't remember my baptism it meant that the congregation had a responsibility to remember my baptism *for me* and continually remind me of what it means.

Simply put, an important part of being a Christian is living as part of a community that is committed to following Jesus Christ. And that commitment is rooted in baptism. Whether it is an infant or an adult being baptized, baptism is about commitment. If a child is being baptized, the commitment of God and the congregation to the child is emphasized. If an older person is being baptized, the commitment of that person to God and God's kingdom is emphasized. However, both are an important part of baptism as the commitment of a healthy faith is truly a two-way street.

Baptism means that God has claimed us as God's own and that God is committed to loving us and remaining with us in life and in death. We receive this grace not because we deserve it but simply because God's love is so expansive that nothing we can do or not do can separate us from that love, as Romans chapter eight reminds us. And the Christian life is the faithful response to that truth.

As Presbyterians, we do not believe that we achieve salvation for ourselves. The words and waters of baptism are not some magic potion that secures our salvation, whether baptized as an infant or as an adult. Baptism is a recognition and joyful reminder that God has sealed us into God's life and love.

And yet, we are not passive recipients of the God's grace. Baptism seals us into a life of service in which we faithfully and gratefully respond to God's grace. Baptism without a life of service that follows it is nothing more than a sentimental moment for a good picture in a scrapbook. But baptism that is followed by faithful service is an authentic response to the wonder of the grace it represents.

And that authentic response to baptism is not just the responsibility of the individual. It's just as much the responsibility of the congregation as a whole. Our liturgy speaks to that truth. In our Book of Common Worship, the congregation is asked to answer the following questions in the affirmative:

1. Will you, by your prayers and witness, help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ?
2. Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture this child by word and deed, with love and prayer?
3. Will you encourage them to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of his church?

So, in the moments when I feel inadequate (yes, pastors feel inadequate at times), in the moments when I feel alone and isolated, unworthy and incapable, I remind myself that in my baptism the whole body of Christ has taken a vow to guide and nurture me through this journey of faith. How wonderful is it to know that we aren't alone and that baptism means we are part of a big family who has taken a vow to help us along the way?

We can disagree about a bunch of things as a church. We can get a lot of things wrong. But if we remain grounded in our baptismal promises and work to be a community that is committed to faithfully responding to those promises, then we're gonna be just fine!

And today, we celebrate Meg Boden taking a step to respond to that baptismal promise. The Book of Order (our denomination's form of government) says the following about being ordained as an elder: "Ordered ministries are gifts to the church to order its life so that the ministry of the whole people of God may flourish. The existence of these ordered ministries in no way diminishes the importance of the commitment of all members to the total ministry of the church" (G.20102).

Meg has been called to a particular ordered ministry to which some of us are called to. As the Book of Order states, this does not diminish the importance of commitment by all of us who are the Church. But today we celebrate Meg taking a very tangible step to respond to her baptismal promises by taking a leadership position in this church, to help us flourish as a congregation, and be better able to respond to the promises made to us in our baptisms.

So thanks be to God for the waters of our baptism! Remember your baptism and respond faithfully to it!

Rev. Stephen M. Fearing

Beaumont Presbyterian Church

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In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of God's people say: **Amen.**