

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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January 12, 2020
Baptism of the Lord
Matthew 3:13-17

Standing With the One Who Stands Alongside

In the Presbyterian tradition of our church, we observe two sacraments—baptism and the Lord's Supper. The most basic definition of a sacrament is an outward or visible sign of an inward or invisible grace. Through baptism with its use of cleansing water, and the Lord's Supper in which bread and fruit of the vine are utilized, we celebrate the grace of God given to us in Jesus.

Our constitution, the *Book of Order* as it's called in the Presbyterian church says, "Baptism is the sign and seal of our incorporation into Jesus Christ." (W-3.0402) And it says that "The Lord's Supper is the sign and seal of our communion with the crucified and risen Lord." (W-3.0409) It is through these two sacraments that we most fully enter in and immerse ourselves and identify with the one we call our savior, Jesus Christ.

With the season of Christmas now behind us for another year, our focus in this next season shifts from a mode of preparation for and anticipation of the coming of Jesus, to that to which these two sacraments point—incorporation into Jesus, and communion with Jesus as we seek to deepen and grow in our faith and discipleship.

The story of Jesus, as we have it in the Bible, has almost no information about the time between Jesus' infancy and his adulthood. There is that one story of Jesus as a young boy going to the temple and conversing with the Jewish leaders there in such a way that they marveled at his knowledge, wisdom and insight. Apart from that one little vignette though, the next reports of Jesus have to do with him in his adulthood presenting himself to John the Baptist for baptism. This is both a natural way to begin the story of Jesus' ministry, and it is a most curious way to begin.

It is both natural as well as curious as we think about the various layers of meaning that there are in this sacrament. With its use of water, the most elemental of all cleansing substances, a basic understanding of the meaning of baptism is that it is a washing and cleaning and purifying event. This is what John the Baptist was proclaiming as he was baptizing those who were seeking the forgiveness of sins that day when Jesus showed up. In this sense, baptism is a ritual washing or cleansing in which the sins of the one being baptized are being washed away, providing the one being baptized with a clean slate going forward. Baptism is a new or fresh beginning.

This continues to be one of the most basic understandings of baptism to this day. Baptism most often marks the beginning of one's Christian life.

But it is a curious way to begin the account of Jesus' ministry if we are to understand baptism as being offered for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus, as the son of God, had no such need for forgiveness. Why would someone without sin submit himself for baptism for the forgiveness of sins?

This conundrum would be confounding if it were not for the other layers of the meaning of baptism. However, another of the meanings of baptism though may also add to the curiosity of Jesus presenting himself for baptism.

While water is a fundamental source of cleansing and refreshment, it is also a force to be reckoned with when there is too much of it. While water is a most basic elemental need for the sustenance of biological life, it can also be a source of destruction and death. We can see this in the deaths of those who are killed by the power of nature during and after a hurricane with the storm surges and flooding that accompany them. Closer to home, it seems that every winter there are those

who are caught up in a mountain avalanche in which they are swept down the mountain in the rush of snow that suffocates those trapped beneath the power of frozen water.

In Christian baptism, this power of water is symbolized in how the one being baptized goes under the water, symbolically dying, and then coming up out of the water as if rising from death to new life. As it is a new beginning after one's sins have been washed away, it is also a new beginning after dying to one's old life, and being born again to a new life with Christ.

While this second layer in the meaning of baptism is powerful and meaningful to us, in that it reminds of the newness of life that is ours as Christians, both in this life and in the life to come, it falls a bit flat when we apply it to Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. Just as Jesus had no sin of which he needed to repent, Jesus also had no need to die to his old life and embrace a new one. Jesus' life as the incarnate son of God, was as full and complete as possible.

It's at yet another layer of meaning where perhaps we can find resonance for Jesus' own baptism by John. For it is in baptism that we acknowledge God's claim on us as part of the family of faith. When one is baptized, the community of faith is celebrating that person as a son or daughter of God and welcoming that person into the Christian community. Baptism marks those who pledge to follow Jesus in their living.

It's at this point that Jesus being baptized is most understandable. By Jesus coming to John, asking that he be baptized, Jesus is staking his claim with us as those who are blessed and welcomed by God. As we read in the account of Jesus' baptism, "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.'" (Mt. 3:16-17)

Our *Book of Order* says it succinctly this way, "In his own baptism, Jesus identified himself with sinners—yet God claimed him as a beloved Son, and sent the Holy Spirit to anoint him for service." (W-3.0401)

It's in this way that Jesus' baptism is a wonderful way for us to make the transition from celebrating Jesus' birth, to joining with Jesus as he launches his ministry with his own baptism. As Jesus began his ministry from the time of his baptism, so we follow in his stead from our own baptism and into the Christian life.

That's where the second of the two sacraments we observe—the Lord's Supper—becomes the way in which we regularly recommit to our baptismal launching. Because while baptism happens only once—at the beginning of the Christian life, the Lord's Supper happens frequently for the gathered people of God.

As we begin this new year, this new decade, and this new season in our church, we do so with the assurance of Jesus as our companion who joins us along our way.

Last Sunday, Jody introduced a focus that we want to coalesce around over the next few weeks during this time of year when there is a sense of new beginnings. She told us about a Presbyterian minister named Richard Halverson, who after serving a number of congregations as pastor, also served as chaplain to the United States Senate for 14 years in the 1980s and 1990s. At the end of every worship service in which he participated, he concluded with this benediction in which he sent the worshipers into the world to do the work of Christ.

Wherever you go, God is sending you.
Wherever you are, God has put you there.
God has a purpose in your being there.
Christ who indwells you has something he wants to do through you where you are.
Believe this, and go in his grace and love and power.

(From Rev. Stan Ott, "Centered and Soaring" training conference, 11/1-2, 2019)

For those who were in Halverson's worshiping congregation, this benediction became their marching orders. As those baptized believers who have been marked as Christ's, who have been born to new life, and who have been cleansed of all that separates them from right relationships with God and one another, understand that the presence of Jesus in their lives changes how they see their current circumstances, whatever they may be.

Oh there may be some among us who sense a calling to go and minister in Christ's name in some particular place away from here. And we celebrate when someone so called by God answers that call and goes out and away

Most or many of us have not yet sensed such a call to go. That does not mean that there is no call. Halverson's benediction is a powerful and succinct declaration that wherever we are—here, or there, or anywhere along the way—that is the place in which God purposefully acts through Jesus who lives in each of us.

On this day that we mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry, let us commit, or recommit to following in the way Jesus leads, knowing that, in Halverson's words, "God has a purpose in your being there. [And] Christ who indwells you has something he wants to do through you where you are."

What a comfort and assurance it is to know that we are standing with the one—Jesus—who stands alongside us.