

## The Baptism of Jesus and Its Meaning for Us Today

Matthew 3:13-17 Galatians 3: 27-8

It was 2020, 5 years ago when I began a series of sermons of Baptism. After 3 weeks we closed down due to the pandemic and the series was short circuited. So I decided to write a book on baptism, calling it *Baptism: A Living Sacrament of the Christian Life*. Baptism is the most comprehensive and complete symbol of the Christian life. Not the Cross, Baptism. Think of Baptism as a jewel with 10 beautiful facets each one revealing a dimension our life in Christ. So today let's examine that jewel and its facets.

### I. Following Jesus

This is the most concrete meaning of baptism. Jesus calls us, saying as he did to those first disciples: "Follow me!" Some define Christian faith by a set of beliefs or doctrines, but at its core it is a way of life, a path. "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood", the poet Robert Frost wrote, "And I—I took the one less traveled by / And that has made all the difference."

Such is our decision as we follow Jesus. Living in America we may think it is the road *most* traveled, but I think it is always the one less traveled by.

One of my favorite descriptions of being a Christian comes from Dallas Willard who speaks of discipleship as being an *apprentice* of Jesus. An

apprentice is one, he writes.” ...who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is.” I like that image a lot. It reminds us of who the master is and it implies that there will be trial and error, successes and failures along the way. I’ve told you the story of the poet Maya Angelou, who after a reading and lecture, was approached by someone who announced: “I’m a Christian!” She replied, “Already?!”

## II. Being the Beloved

One of the deepest meanings of baptism is Being the Beloved. When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, as he came up out of the water the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended as a dove and Jesus heard God saying to him. “You are my son, the Beloved in whom I am well pleased”— in whom I take delight! Can you believe that God not only loves you but also takes delight in you?

One of the most powerful of Henri Nouwen’s spiritual writings is his book, *Life of the Beloved*. He wrote it in response to a friend who was a skeptic and asked, “Why don’t you write a book for me and my friends?” So came the book. Early in it he addressed his friend and all who are reading:

...all I want to say to you is ‘You are the Beloved,’ and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being— ‘You are the Beloved.’

His book made these words reverberate in me. This was the heart of Jesus’ spirituality, and it can be for ours too.

When God said to Jesus at his baptism: “In you I am well pleased,” it might sound like God was applauding him for some good thing he had done. Such is why I like to add my translation: “In you I take delight.” It expresses God’s sheer delight in us for who we are. God is, yes, fond of us!

One of my favorite of all children’s writings in my life as a pastor was the offering envelope that one of the deacons taking offering gave me after one worship service. A young girl named Anna Kate, I think she was around 6 years old, had turned in her offering envelope.

At the place where she put how much she was giving she wrote out with a long list of zeros was at least about 10 million dollars. Then underneath for the “Sunshine Fund”, for people in need, she wrote out another rows of zeroes after 85, which was at least 85 billion dollars.

Then her name, Anna Kate

Then, as her address she wrote her house number, 6017.

Then her message to God:

To God,

I hope your are having a

Good, then something scratched out, Time!

Looking at me! (with a tiny heart underneath the exclamation point).

That's how God looks at us.

### III. Naming Jesus "Lord"

What can it mean to name Jesus Lord? The earliest baptismal vow was "Jesus Christ is Lord". It is not a magic formula to get you on God's good side. It expresses an alignment of one's life next to Jesus. One woman in a former church when asked what naming Jesus "Lord" means replied, "Jesus is my Center."

In its earliest days, when Christianity was an illegal religion in Rome, to say "Jesus is Lord" was a dangerous political act. It stood against what citizens had to say: "Caesar is Lord!" Jesus said everyone serves *some* lord, so you better choose carefully. Or as Bob Dylan sang it:

You're gonna have to serve somebody, yes you are.

You're gonna have to serve somebody,  
Well it may be the devil or it may be the Lord.  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

When we say in baptismal waters, "Jesus Christ is Lord", we cannot possibly know all that means, but as you follow him he will teach you what means.

#### IV. Turning and Entering the Kingdom of God

Jesus main preaching and teaching was about the kingdom of God. And he said it had drawn near and invited us to turn and enter it. The word we generally hear is "repent", but it means turning or returning to God. Sometimes we need to turn around. Jesus said one day, "Unless you change and become as a little child, you will never enter the kingdom of God." It's that easy and that hard.

So *change* is what it means too. Jesus asked everyone to change, change in the ways they most needed to change. Not change in the way other people around are telling you to change, but change as God leads you in his gentle way.

#### V. Baptism as Washing

Perhaps the most elemental meaning of baptism is being washed, washed in water for the cleansing of our souls. Baptism means the washing away of sin, and its residue of guilt, remorse and regret. The earliest description of sin was

being stained. We can feel stained by what we have done, but also by what others have done to us, when they have sinned against us. How we want to be washed clean!

“Out damned spot. Out I say!”, said Lady McBeth, looking at her hand stained by murder. We can try, but the miracle of grace is that what we cannot do for ourselves, God has done for us, and does every day.

I tell young people that in the Baptist way of Baptism, going all the way under the water and out, says to us “God forgives all your sins, not some of them!” You don’t get a little bit wet! You get all wet.

## VI. New Birth and New Creation

We are familiar with Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus when he said to him, “You must be born again”. Nicodemus didn’t know what he was talking about. He took it literally: You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb!” But Jesus was dealing with the deepest level of spirit. It is a “being born anew”, as it is best translated. A being born of the Spirit. Some of us grew up in a tradition that said, “If you’re not a ‘born again’ Christian you’re not a real Christian!” Almost ruined the word for a lot of us.

But Jesus said the new birth is a mystery. The Spirit is like the wind: you don’t know where it comes from or where it goes. But we do experience its effects.

For some the Spirit blows in like a hurricane, rearranging everything in your life, just like that! For others it comes like a cool summer breeze making our life and our days beautiful. Some are like Billy Graham, who said he remembered the exact moment he became a Christian. His wife Ruth Graham said she could not pinpoint a place or time. It was like going to sleep in the dark and awakening in the light of a new day. It's spiritual malpractice to say there is only one way to become a Christian.

One has said, "It takes a life time of conversions to become the new creation God has made and called us to be." A being born again and again and again.

Which bring us to the New Creation. God is about personal transformation, yes, but also about social transformation, the transformation of the world. Paul called it the New Creation. The New Creation at its core means Reconciliation! Paul wrote these thrilling words:

If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation, the new has come, the old has passed away. God was in Christ reconciling the world to God's own self and giving to us the ministry of reconciliation! (2 Corinthians 5:17-18)

Becoming one with God, with one another and with our own dear selves. to make the world one, as God made it to be. That may be God's fondest dream, restoration of our elemental oneness.

## VII. Baptism as Holy Spirit, Anointing and Calling

When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit anointed him for his calling as the son of God in the world. The Spirit is calling us all to the service of love in the world. It takes many forms in our lives. I like to say it this way: “Baptism is the ordination of all Christians to be ministers.” In our Covenant we say, we are all ministers here. It has thrilled me over the years to see all the ways you embody the love of God in our community. So as I baptise people, after they come up out of the water, I revive an ancient tradition by laying hands on them praying the Spirit’s presence as they become ministers of Christ’s love.

## VIII. Baptism as Belonging

Baptism means belonging, belonging to a family of faith. Belonging is one of the most elemental of human needs. When Theodor Geisel, aka, Dr. Seuss would teach aspiring children’s book writers he would say their book should be about at least one of what he named, The Seven Needs of Children.” Near the top was “the need to belong”. Don’t you think he’s right?

Perhaps one of the most poignant questions of our lives is, “Do I belong?” That is why so many of our classic books for children and adults have as their main character orphans. It is an emotionally painful experience to be part of a group, but feel an outsider. And more feel it than we ever know.



I was reading this acclaimed Reformation scholar, Alister McGrath's little book on Redemption. Big word, a theologically intimidating word. But guess what the first of his meanings of redemption is? "Being Wanted." Don't we all, want to be wanted?

In Baptism we are given a new family, a family of faith. We are "members of one another" here in the Body of Christ.

And guess what? *Everyone is welcome or it's not the Body of Christ.* Paul gave us a pretty revolutionary picture of the church as a place of belonging when he wrote:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

I spoke of the New Creation we are now part of. The old creation is full of marks that divide us, race, gender, rank, religion and class. But now all earthly distinctions have lost their power to divide. All belong to the Family of God. Paul wrote of the New Creation, "From now on we regard no one from a human point of view!" (2 Corinthians 5:16) Yes!

## IX. Baptism as Dying and Rising

There are two more meanings. You may have noticed—each section has gotten shorter and shorter. I’m not running out of steam; I’m running out of time. So no need to check your watches, these will go in a breeze.

Baptism means that there is a kind of dying and rising on this side of eternity. Jesus spoke of denying one’s self and taking up our cross as we follow. Part of the meaning of these words is that we give up our false self so we might live out of our true self. Our false self is shaped by the world around us. Our true self is the one in which God made us, our unique self created in the divine image.

One way to ponder this is to ask ourselves the question: “What needs to die in order for me to live the fulness of life God wants for me? Mystics speak of “dying before you die.” This is what Jesus is talking about, dying to the things that take away life and embracing the things that give us life, true life.

## X. Resurrection and Eternal Life

This is the glorious message of the Resurrection: as Christ died and was raised to life, so shall we! As Paul exclaimed: “For as in Adam, all die, in Christ shall all be made alive!” All, all, all! This is the news that is too good NOT to be true! We were born in the goodness of God, and we shall return to the goodness of God. The most dramatic meaning of the our immersion under the water and up and out again is Resurrection, dying and rising with Christ. This is all I can say

today about this last meaning, but stay tuned, I have one more Easter sermon in me, for the Sunday after Easter!

John Calvin said, “God knows we are creatures, so loves us in ways that we can understand: in bread and wine and water.” Baptism is God is loving us with water. Amen