

Traditionally the second Sunday in a new year is set aside to celebrate and remember the baptism of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Each of the four Gospels refers to the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, with each one written from a different viewpoint. For example, the Gospel of John, unlike the other three gospels, does not describe the actual event, but records the testimony of John the Baptist concerning the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus as a dove.

In Matthew, John initially resists baptizing Jesus because he recognized that Jesus was without sin and did not need to repent. Mark says that as Jesus came out of the water, the heavens were torn open. But Luke is the only gospel that tells us that Jesus was praying as He was baptized. Each writer gives us a different insight and this adds to our understanding of the importance of this sacrament in the church. This morning, let's look at Luke's account found in the third chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 21 through 22.

Read Luke 3:21-22

Baptism – now there's a topic that can stir up a lively discussion among Christians, especially from different denominations. Some churches, such as the Baptist Church, believe that you must be immersed, while in the Methodist Church you can be either sprinkled, poured or immersed. The young son of a Baptist preacher watched his father baptize someone by immersion. He was fascinated by the ceremony, so the next morning he tried to baptize his three cats in the bathtub. The youngest kitten bore it well, and so did the younger cat, but the old family tom cat rebelled. The old cat struggled with the boy, clawed and scratched him, and finally got away. After considerable effort the boy caught the old tom cat again and proceeded with the ceremony. But things got worse with the old cat clawing and spitting, and scratching the boy's face. Finally, after barely putting a little water on the cat's head, the boy dropped him on the floor in disgust and shouted: "Fine, be a Methodist then, and go to hell."

Before performing a baptism, the priest approached a young father and said: "Baptism is a serious step. Are you prepared?" "I think so," the man replied, "My wife has made appetizers and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of cookies and cakes for the guests." "I don't mean that," the priest responded. "I mean are you prepared spiritually?" "Oh, sure," came the reply, "I've got a keg of beer and a case of whiskey."

One more story; there was a man who was raised as a Methodist, but became active in a Baptist church when he moved to a new town. One day he was helping clean up after a church potluck. He emptied the large, electric coffee pot and handed it to the lady washing the dishes. "Can this be washed like everything else?" she asked. "No," he replied, "This is a Methodist coffee pot. It says right here on the side "Do Not Immerse.""

But seriously, I personally don't believe that it matters how you are baptized: sprinkled, poured, immersed or doused with a fire hose. What really matters is what is in your heart; that you truly believe and accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Just like being in a garage does not make you a car, so baptism and the method used does not make you a Christian. I have always said that Jesus should come into your heart long before any water goes over your head.

Now it should be noted that nowhere in the Bible does it say that Jesus was baptized by one specific method or that He was baptized into one particular denomination or that we must be baptized into a certain denomination to be saved. Remember the church did not come into existence until after Pentecost. Because in baptism we become members of Christ's universal church, the Methodist Church accepts and recognizes all Christian baptisms, and considers baptism as something that should unite rather divide us as Christians.

All of the different methods used by Christian denominations illustrate the rich and diverse symbolism given to baptism in the Bible. Each application of water is a form of washing which represents the washing away of our sins. Being totally buried in water and raised from it is a symbol of our burial and resurrection with Jesus Christ and being born anew of water and the Spirit. Pouring and sprinkling of the water upon our head also signifies God's outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

So, what does baptism mean to you? Is it just another ritual of the church that you have to participate in? Did you just do it because everybody else did? Have you ever given any serious thought as to why we are baptized?

Using the baptism of Jesus as our background, let's dig a little deeper this morning into the meaning of baptism. First and foremost, baptism is our way of announcing to the world that we are followers of Jesus Christ. It is a public declaration of our private decision to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. By baptism, believers affirm their commitment to God and their readiness to be identified before the world as Christians.

There are also several other meanings to baptism as illustrated by Jesus' actions in this morning's text. First it is a moment of decision. Jesus made a deliberate decision to allow John to baptize Him. This was a turning point in Jesus' life as He began His public ministry and His eventual journey to the cross and resurrection. At His baptism, Jesus began to fulfill the mission that God had for Him and the reason He became one of us at Christmas. It is also a moment of decision for us and hopefully a turning point in our lives. Who do we choose to serve – the world and our selfish desires or Jesus? Will we give Jesus full control of our life and follow Him?

It is also a moment of identification. In our text, Luke tells us that "when all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too." When John the Baptist emerged from the wilderness

people flocked to hear him and to be baptized. Throughout the whole countryside there was a movement back to God, a sort of revival. Thus, Jesus knew His hour had come; for a long time, Jesus must have been waiting for a sign as to when to begin His ministry, and the emergence of John from the wilderness was that sign; remember John was called to prepare the way for Jesus. Jesus recognized that He too must identify Himself with this movement back to God and with these people who were searching for God. In baptism, we identify ourselves with fellow believers, and separate ourselves from the masses of the world and their pursuit of the latest fads and idols.

It was a moment of approval. Here Jesus was asking for His Father's approval of His decision to begin His ministry, and in return received His destiny with the cross. At His baptism, God gave His approval of Jesus' decision by stating: "You are my Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased." The *Message* paraphrases it as follows: "You are My Son, chosen and marked by My love, pride of My life." Isn't it reassuring that at our baptism God said to each one of us: "You are my child, and I love you; I am proud of you!" Thus, it is a moment of acceptance. In baptism God adopts us as His sons and daughters. God claims us as His children and promises that His grace will surround us all the days of our life. By His grace we are assured that we are truly loved and cared for, never forgotten, always forgiven, and never alone.

It was also a moment of equipping. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove. In our text for this morning, Luke sees the coming of the Spirit as a sign of empowerment. As God equipped Jesus for His ministry, so His Spirit is here to help each of us in our ministries and service. The Spirit has bestowed on each of us spiritual gifts that are to be used in service to God. When we accept Jesus into our heart, His Spirit comes to dwell within us, to guide and comfort us along life's journey with all its turns, obstacles, rough places, and temptations.

But the real point I want to make this morning is found in the sixth chapter of Romans, the first 14 verses.

Read Romans 6:1-14

Here the Apostle Paul uses baptism to illustrate that when we accept Jesus into our hearts we die to sin. Now at the time that Paul wrote this letter, immersion was the only method used for baptism. Thus, when a candidate of the Early Church came forward to be baptized and join the church, they went down into the water until it covered them completely and then they emerged washed of their sins.

Paul saw this as a symbolic representation of dying, being buried and rising again with Jesus. When a person descends into the water and the water closes over their head, it is like being buried. When they emerge from the water, it is like rising from the grave. Thus, baptism identifies us with Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection into new life. Baptism

symbolizes dying to our old self, our old life with all its bad habits and sinful ways, and rising to a new life in Christ, a new person united with Christ, to a new life of freedom; one that is not **totally free** from sin and temptation, but one that is free from the **bonds** of sin. Do you hear that: we will still have to deal with sin and temptation in our life, but because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, sin no longer has a grip on us. We may never be martyrs, but we can die to self, to sin, and to the world. That's the significance of baptism; we die with Christ and rise to a new life.

Paul is telling us that as Jesus rose from the grave in the power of a new life, so in our baptism we are given a new life by the power of the blood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As we sang earlier, there's power in the blood to wash away our sins and make us whole again. This newness of life assumes a newness of the heart. Now here's another key point: while God gives us a fresh start, there are certain expectations on our part; we should devote our new life completely to God, always putting Him first rather than ourselves. We should be changed from being self-centered to God-centered.

Our baptism symbolizes our break from our old life of sin and bad habits, and our new walk with Jesus. The Apostle Paul describes this new life in 2 Corinthians 5:17 as follows: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" This term "in Christ" or "united with Christ" made sense to the people of Paul's time where olive groves and vineyards were a routine part of life. Here Paul is referring to grafting when you unite or attach a young shoot or bud to a growing plant. In John 15, Jesus tells us that He is the vine and we are the branches; if we remain in Him, we will bear much fruit. Thus, at our baptism, we are grafted and united with Jesus, the true Vine of Life. We are given a new life and a new source of strength and hope. We pass from the old world where sin had a life-threatening grip on us into a new life where the Spirit gives us the power to overcome whatever life throws our way.

At our baptism we entered into a new life with new challenges and opportunities. Jesus has promised us a new life, but as I just said, this promise comes with some expectations. We are to put Jesus first in our life, but do we? Does He get the first fruits of our time, resources, and thoughts? Or does He get what's left over after we have satisfied our personal desires and passions?

At our baptism, we made a covenant with God to faithfully serve Him; to faithfully participate in the ministries of His church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness. How did you do in 2025? Were you faithful; did you actively participate in our service projects, in worship, and in Bible studies? Did your actions reflect your love for God and your neighbors?

As we begin 2026 with all its new challenges and opportunities, do you want to do better? Do you want to grow closer to the Lord this year? Do you want this to be the year that you truly

experience His presence and peace in your life and family? If so, if you want to reaffirm the vows made at your baptism and rededicate your life to God, then I invite you to come forward during the closing hymn and touch the water in the baptism font over here. Let this be the start of a year dedicated to the Lord. Remember your baptism. Amen