

OPENING SENTENCE:

The heavens opened, the Spirit descended, and a voice sounded: This is my Beloved Son.

PRAYER: Eternal God, at the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan, you proclaimed him your beloved Son, and anointed him with the Spirit. Grant that all who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.

Sermon: Baptism of the Lord

Scripture: 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 pleased." THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

John's baptism, suggest transformation and turning, rather than simple repentance for sins. The baptism we read about in Matthew does suggest a transformation of some sort, perhaps even a rite of passage for Jesus. In more sacramental Christian traditions, the Holy sacraments of the church are said to represent a passage or transformation for those who enter into them. In what ways does your traditions understand the transformation or turning that takes place in the sacrament of baptism? From what and to what is it a movement?

Baptism is the original act, and water an original symbol often associated with birth and rebirth. The biblical story of God's people contains several notable stories of rebirth after passing through water, among them the parting of the waters for Moses as the children of Israel escaped Egypt, and the parallel version of the parting of the waters for Joshua when the people reached the promised land.

In each case – and generally, when water is used as a symbol of rebirth – people enter the water as one thing (Slaves or wanderers in these particular stories) and emerge as something else, something entirely different.

The writer of Matthew employs the narrative structure found in the other Gospels: he places the baptism of Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry, a preparation for what will later follow. How do we understand baptism as preparatory to our lives in Christ? For what is God preparing each of the baptized? For what is this communal act preparing the community? Christians are called to be a community capable of forming people with virtues sufficient to witness to God's truth in the world.

The celebration of the baptism of the Lord is traditionally a time to contemplate both Jesus' baptism and our own. To make sense of both these mysteries, it is also necessary to contemplate the incarnation itself. Neither Jesus' baptism nor our own makes sense if not considered in the light of the incarnation.

Reflecting on how we are restored in the waters of baptism requires reflection on how God created, entered into, and radically transformed those waters. Pondering the reasons for Jesus' own baptism requires pondering what it means for the Son of God to have become human. In short, to understand baptism, we must understand the reality, the physicality, of being human, and what it means to say that God saved us by becoming just like us.

Building on scripture, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed make clear that to be human is to be physical, to be tangible, to have senses, and to be sensed. We are not wispy souls trapped temporarily in a body that is foreign to who we really are. Christians who subscribe to these Creeds believe that our bodies are integral to who we are as human beings. We live out our existence within the possibilities and

limitations of our bodies. When we look forward to the coming Kingdom of God, we look forward to our bodies being resurrected and made new. Our hope is not to become a disembodied soul, for that would mean hoping to become something less than what we are – something less than what God created us to be. Instead, we hope for the renewal of all creation, including the renewal of our bodies. Our hope is to become fully and completely human.

Because we are both incorporeal and embodied, our salvation is worked out through both divine and physical elements. In the case of baptism, the physical element is water. Matthew echoes Genesis when he describes Jesus' baptism. Genesis records that, in the beginning, the Spirit hovered over the waters. The Word of God was present from the beginning and created the world. What the Word created was good. In Matthew, the Spirit of God once again hovers over the waters, and once again the Word of God speaks. Genesis describes God bringing order over chaos through His Word. Matthew describes God taming the chaos of our sins through His Word. Genesis describes the abundant possibilities of God's creative work. Matthew describes the renewal of those possibilities through God's entering into creation in order to redeem it. The parallels are stark, and they clearly link baptism to God's creative acts more generally.

Water is crucial to creation. It is not the author of life, but it is part of and necessary for life.

Water is also part of and necessary for new life in Christ. Water gives witness to God's love for God's people. Blessed by the Word, water is the means by which we are buried and, at least vicariously, experience death. Water is also the means by which we are scrubbed clean of the sins that lead to darkness and death. Water washes us and regenerates us. In the water of baptism, we foreshadow our deaths and emerge victorious to new life.

Of course, water alone does not accomplish any of this. In his "Small Catechism", Luther attributed the efficacy of baptism to the Word of God "in and with the water." While Luther wrote this to explain how our baptism is effective, he also offered a way to understand Jesus' own baptism. Not water alone, but the Word of God "in and with the water." What is Matthew describing other than Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God made flesh, in and with the water of the Jordan? By entering this water, Jesus did not seek his own repentance, for he had nothing of which to repent. Instead, Jesus offered himself as the answer to John's call for all people to repent.

Thus, in his baptism, Jesus showed what it means for the Word of God to become incarnate, to take on flesh. As a historical, tangible man, Jesus accomplished the salvific acts of the eternal, divine Son of God. In his baptism, Jesus restored water to its proper role and made even more poignant the necessity of water for life. The water of baptism is necessary for everlasting life.

JUST A NOTE.

It is a fact that never in all history before this had any Jew submitted to being baptized. The Jews knew and used baptism, but only for converts who came into Judaism from some other faith. It was natural that sin-stained, polluted converts should be baptized; but the Jews had never conceived that they, the chosen people, the children of Abraham, assured of God's salvation, could ever need baptism. Now for the first time in their national history, they became aware of their own sin and their own urgent need of God. Never before had there been such a unique national movement of penitence and of search for God. Theologians looked at Jesus' baptism as a precursor to his Crucifixion, sometimes describing the crucifixion as the ultimate baptism.

Paul's theme was as Jesus as the new Adam, arguing that, in order to rescue humanity, it was necessary for Jesus to experience the fullness of what it means to be human. Jesus was not just a paradigm or generic representative of us all; he was also an individual who lived at a particular time and in a particular place. By becoming a particular person, the Son of God showed us not only how to be human beings, but also how to be particular men and women. Living as one before the fall, Jesus offered us a glimpse of what God intends for us, if only we can embrace those intentions. Born into a fallen world, Jesus sacrificed himself for others and took on their sin and pain. Thus, in the incarnate Son of God, in the man Jesus of Nazareth, we catch a glimpse of what it means to be fully human, and in baptism we are offered the possibility of embracing our humanity.

BENEDICTION.

Matthew's baptism features a public manifestation of the Spirit of God, as well as a direct announcement of Jesus as the Son of God to John the Baptizer and possibly to bystanders as well. This early manifestation of the "Trinity" present at the baptism parallels Matthew 28:19, where new followers of Jesus are to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. We could well use this day to do the same.