First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

January 8, 2023

I Wonder

Matthew 3:13-17 - MSG

**13-14**Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him. John objected, “I’m the one who needs to be baptized, not *you*!”

**15**But Jesus insisted. “Do it. God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.” So John did it.

**16-17**The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God’s Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.”

There’s an old joke that makes the rounds in clergy circles, which talks about a church that had a horrible rodent infestation. The rodents were everywhere, chewing on the bibles and hymnals, leaving their droppings all over the place and generally causing havoc wherever they showed up. The church had tried everything, short of calling the exterminator, in order to get rid of these pests, but nothing seemed to be working. Finally, the pastor had had enough. “That’s it, I can’t take this anymore!” “Call the exterminator,” he thundered to his admin. After a brief pause, the admin quietly replied, “Pastor, I know how to get rid of these pests,” she said, “all we have to do is baptize them and we’ll never see them again.”

Today, we celebrate the baptism of our Lord. The authors of Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this event, and it is the last major celebration of the Christmas season.

Jesus’ baptism is a threshold moment in his life, a moment when he leaves the security of life in Nazareth and steps out on the public stage for the first time. In verse 14 of Matthew’s account, we see that John is reluctant to baptize Jesus - *“I’m the one who needs to be baptized, not you.”* John’s reluctance is understandable, as he knows who Jesus is and he feels unworthy of baptizing someone who John feels is superior to himself.

Jesus, however, insists and John complies. Verses 16-17 tell us that, *At this moment the true identity of Jesus as God’s Beloved Son is revealed and he is empowered by the Spirit: The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God’s Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.”* For Jesus, this event marks the beginning of a journey that will take him from Nazareth to Jerusalem, from the hills of Galilee to the hill of Calvary.

On the surface, this is pretty straightforward. But, I have to wonder why Jesus chose this particular method to launch his ministry. Why get baptized when, as we read in 1 Peter 2:22, *“He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.”* It seems that Jesus’ true nature could have been revealed in a wide variety of ways other than baptism, so why this particular route?

Well, as you might imagine, I have some thoughts on the matter. Jesus’ baptism by John, manifests Jesus’ complete solidarity with humanity. In the words of Fr. James Martin, a Jesuit priest, ’The divine one, is fully immersing himself, literally in this case, in our humanity’. It also confirms Jesus in his messianic mission and indicates the shape that mission will take. He will be the kind of Servant Leader, outlined by Isaiah in Isaiah 42. ‘He will not shout out, or make his voice heard in the streets’, as many political leaders and angry prophets are wont to do. He will be kind and merciful to all who are oppressed and who carry heavy burdens. ‘He will not break the crushed reed, nor quench the wavering flame’.  But he will be implacable in his pursuit of justice for the poor and exploited: ‘Faithfully he brings true justice; he will neither waver nor be crushed until true justice is established on earth’. He will be a compassionate and merciful leader bringing healing and liberation to his people. His mission will be ‘to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and those who live in darkness from the dungeon’. And he will be a light not just for the people of Israel but for all nations of the world. Looking at it this way, then, there really was no better way for Jesus to begin his ministry.

Here’s a question for you: How many of you remember your own baptism? I imagine that there aren’t too many here that remember that particular event in our own lives, if you were baptized as an infant. I remember mine, however, as I was baptized into the LDS faith. The custom within the LDS church is to baptize children at 8 years old and that’s what happened to me. Mormons practice baptism by immersion and I remember thinking that my Dad was holding me under for a bit too long and that I was going to drown. Obviously, I didn’t drown, but it was kind of scary for a moment.

Given the centrality of baptism to our identity as Christians, it won’t come as a surprise to any of us that there’s a whole lot of debate as to the “proper” way to baptize and be baptized. Each iteration of the Christian church has a preferred method of administering this Sacrament. Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians and Presbyterians prefer sprinkling, or making the sign of the cross on a persons forehead, while Mormons, Baptists, and many evangelical churches prefer immersion.

Here’s the thing, though, to my way of thinking, the “how” is less important than the “why,” when it comes to baptism. The method doesn’t matter, it’s the reason for getting baptized that’s the point, here. Baptism is our entry point into the family of God, and it becomes the defining characteristic of our Christian identity.

So, I wonder, why is it that some denominations refuse to recognize baptisms preformed in other branches of Christianity? The Nicene Creed reminds us that, “We believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins,” yet we are all aware of the fact that many denominations insist on re-baptizing new members.

As a Pastor, I was taught that as long as the formula of baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is used, then the baptism is valid, Period. It doesn’t need to be done over and over again, it’s a one and done, so to speak, and yet, that’s not the case for so many of our Christian siblings.

How some traditions understand the nature and make up of the Trinity, causes problems for others. Mormons, for example, have a different understanding of how the Trinity works, and as a result, baptisms preformed in the LDS faith, aren’t recognized as valid by Presbyterians. I strongly disagree with this because, again in my view, as long as a baptism is done in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, however that happens to be defined, then it counts.

Baptism, a practice that is a sacrament in every single Christian denomination, shouldn’t be used as a weapon. It shouldn’t be used as a way of excluding folks or keeping people from fully participating in the life of the church.

Did Jesus fully immerse himself in our humanity to demonstrate God’s salvation for just a few? Do you think that this is why Jesus came to be baptized? I certainly don’t think so.

Because baptism is our entry point into the christian life, I believe that it is through baptism, that we are called to be partners in exactly the same ministry of love and acceptance, of healing and compassion, of justice and mercy, that Jesus undertook following his own experience at the Jordan.

Today, we have the opportunity to remember the promises made at our own baptism, the promises made either by ourselves or on our behalf. Today, I encourage you to take advantage of that opportunity to reflect on those promises. Today, let us take this opportunity to renew our partnership with Jesus in the ministry of love and acceptance, the ministry of healing and compassion, and the ministry of justice and mercy for the sake of all creation.

AMEN