

## Why Baptism?

You've probably noticed that this is the third or fourth Sunday that we've spent on the baptism of Jesus.

And you may be wondering why so much attention, especially at the beginning of our new church year, is focused on Jesus's baptism?

After all, isn't baptism simply a ceremony, usually done with our little children, where everyone gets dressed in white, the relatives gather, and the priest pours some water and places some oil on the forehead?

It's a nice ceremony.

You get a little card and a candle.

It makes us feel close together.

And that is that.

But is it really?

In fact, perhaps the reason we spend so much time with the baptism of Jesus, is that baptism is not simply a nice ceremony.

Instead, it is an urgent invitation to discover a new way to encounter and live life.

What happens to Jesus after his baptism?

He is forced into the desert to confront his demons.

That is precisely what baptism invites us to do.

Which may be some of the rationale behind those who say that only adults should be baptized.

Because it does take, at least usually, an adult who has gathered enough fears, anxieties, worries, and traumas, to recognize our need to confront them.

To face them.

To recognize our need to spend time with them in our own desert.

To grapple with our own shadow side.

Because until we do, it's very difficult to grasp the upside down, inside out invitation of Jesus to live a life within what he calls the kingdom of God.

Where the poor, the ugly and the weak are deemed to be the most precious in God's sight.

While the rich, the smart and sophisticated, are pitied – for their blindness, obtuseness and frequent shamelessness.

So here we are again this Sunday.

Back to the beginning.

Back to the Jordan River.

And what is playing out before our eyes?

There's Jesus, kneeling before John, asking John for baptism.

But look closer.

Because what's actually there, in the muddy Jordan River, is God.

Kneeling before humanity.

God, through Jesus, submits to humanity.

It's a clue, a very important clue, that in Jesus, God is about to do something very new indeed!

Jesus submits to the baptism of John.

And what does this baptism look like?

John's baptism is the baptism of wrath and judgment.

Jesus submits to and receives the baptism of "the axe being laid at the root of the tree."

This is the baptism that John offers.

It assumes a vengeful, angry God.

Not because God is like that, but because **we** are.

Violence and revenge and anger, these are **our** ways of dealing with our alienation from one another, and our alienation from God.

Don't take my word for it!

Just glance at the latest headline or turn on the evening news!

Whether it's the LA police putting out a sick Valentine's Day card of George Floyd that reads: "You take my breath away" or the Taliban seeking a final military victory despite ongoing peace talks, violence and revenge and anger is our way of dealing with our alienation from one another, and from God.

And Jesus bears the full weight of this as he is baptized with our wrath and our judgment.

Betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends, tried and convicted by the best legal and religious minds of the day, then crucified and killed.

This morning, God submits to humanity — so that humanity may at long last submit to God.

God submits to us so that we can finally come to see that our best thinking leads us only into violence and revenge toward one another.

That our insistence on controlling people, places and things is a dead end, not only figuratively, but quite literally too.

That our love affairs with cultures and clans blinds us to the essential unity of all that is.

God submits to us so that we can at long last submit to God.

And discover that in submission, we indeed encounter a refining fire.

But not one of condemnation or guilt or rejection.

No.

God's refining fire burns with compassion.

It engulfs with forgiveness.

It consumes with mercy.

Which is what the Psalmist is pointing to this morning.

“He guides the humble in doing right and teaches his way to the lowly.”

Which is another way of describing what it means to be in right relation with God.

It means: **we** submit to **God**.

Now, I'll grant you, this is something that's been twisted and distorted over so many years that the mere thought of submitting to God sends most folks running for the exits.

Too often “submission” is used by the powerful to control the weak.

By husbands over wives.

Bosses over workers.

Dominant races and classes over minorities.

But that is submission as WE practice it.

And it couldn't be more different from the submission into which God invites us!

The submission into which God invites us turns everything we thought we knew about God on its head.

We think of God as a God of judgment — yet here is God, hanging from the cross, dying for us.

We think of God as the one who separates good from bad, the saved from the damned.

But lo and behold, here is God, searching out and finding lost coins.

Lost sheep.

Lost daughters and sons.

And baptism becomes an entry point into the strange world of this unimaginable God.

A world in which hate is met with forgiveness.

Where revenge is transformed into compassion.

Where looking out for myself is surrendered, so that I may look out for you.

That's why baptism is a lot like drowning.

By drowning who we are — so that we may arise — into who we are meant to become.

In our drowning, we invite the Holy Spirit to settle within our hearts, minds and souls.

Replacing "I" with "Thou."

When we do, it changes how we think about everything.

For example, we often think that the work of the Christian is done here in church, on Sundays.

It's not.

We come together on Sundays for strength and nourishment and insight so that we may then carry out our true work in the only place it can be carried out: in the everyday world.

You bear the image of God.

So does every human being.

Being baptized calls us to witness to that fact.

Particularly to those who have no idea that they too bear the image of God.

This is our calling as baptized people!

It is our task!

And we are faithful to this task when we are forgiving cousin Johnny for being obnoxious at the Christmas table, and when we are opening our church hall for mass vaccinations against COVID.

We are faithful to this task when we give our sweetheart the benefit of the doubt – and when we lobby the legislature for a livable wage.

We are faithful to this task whether we're in suits and ties in the office or in shorts and slippers on the streets, hustling for our daily bread.

We live this upside down gospel in our everyday lives because we live in a world desperate for the good news it brings!

That real power is found in weakness!

That real success is discovered in daily service to those in need!

That true fame is found in quiet acts of kindness.

In anonymous giving.

In random acts of mercy and compassion.

With a sprinkle of water, and the mark of chrism oil, baptism is our "yes" to "the central miracle and paradox of our faith.

That no matter how unlikely it seems, life and love and light shall overwhelm, absorb and defeat death and evil and darkness." Brian Doyle, modified.

So come!

Let's set out on this marvelous journey!

Trusting that "All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies." Psalm 25:9.

+amen



