

Date: January 11, 2004

SUNDAY: Baptism of Christ

SERMON: Claimed and Commissioned

Text(s): Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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One day a Congregationalist pastor and a Baptist pastor were having their usual friendly argument about baptism. (In case you're wondering, this was not David Olsen and I; David and I would never argue about baptism.) The Baptist pastor, as one might expect, was insisting that full immersion was the only method of baptism that was consonant with the meaning of baptism as identification with Christ in his death and resurrection.

The Congregationalist, being, as usual, somewhat more vague, argued that it didn't particularly matter how it was done, so long as the act was done with full regard for its meaning.

At one point, the Congregationalist pastor posed a hypothetical question to his Baptist friend. "Suppose at a baptism, the person was standing in water up to his chest. Would you consider him baptized?"

"Absolutely not," the Baptist replied.

"Well, suppose, he were covered with water clear up to his eyebrows," the Congregationalist went on. "Would he be baptized then?"

His friend was getting a little exasperated at this point, and he said, "No, no, you're missing the point. The person has to be immersed in water completely, so that the top of the head is completely covered."

Whereupon the Congregationalist rejoined, "That's what I've been saying all along, it's only a little bit of water on the top of the head that counts."

Unfortunately, none of the New Testament writers saw fit to give us an answer to this perplexing question, nor does St. Luke or any of the other gospels tell us whether Jesus, at his baptism was sprinkled, splashed, poured, or dunked. And the historic practice of the church has included all of these methods at one time or

another. So it would seem the better part of wisdom not to take an absolutist position on the manner of the proper administration of this sacrament.

We must, however, have a clear understanding of the meaning, or I should say, the meanings, of baptism. And since today is the Feast of the Baptism of Christ on the church calendar, it seems a fitting time to think about some of the meanings of this sacrament of Christian initiation. For baptism is a powerful symbolic act that has the ability to offer us a whole new way of living in the world, though for much of the church's history, this has not always been made clear, either in teaching or in practice.

From the few surviving descriptions we have of practices in the early church, during the first three centuries, baptism was taken so seriously, that candidates had to undergo a 2-3 year preparation. And at the end of that preparation, the baptism itself was a major ordeal. Often a week of fasting and prayer preceded the ceremony, which was often performed at night in conditions of some secrecy, since becoming a Christian could be hazardous to one's health in certain places or times.

According to some of the old descriptions, a candidate would first be stripped of his or her clothing, signifying that he or she was leaving behind the old life of sin; then they would step down naked into the pool, which would have been about knee-deep. After the baptism, as the candidate went up the steps on the opposite side of the pool, he or she was clothed in a new white robe signifying the rebirth into a new life in the new family of Christ, the Church. What a powerful ritual that was, and what an emotional impact it must have had, particularly when the stakes were often very high. Often the newly baptized were in fact leaving their whole old life behind, including severing all family ties, for many families would cut off any who left the worship of the old gods to follow the new way of Christ. And then there was also the disposition of the imperial Roman state toward the Christians, which was sometimes tolerant, but at other times,

brutally repressive depending on the political needs of the emperor or the disposition of local municipal or provincial leaders at the time. A decision to be baptized, or to have one's children baptized took real courage and was evidence of deep faith and commitment to being a disciple of Christ.

After the emperor Constantine legitimized Christianity, however, baptism became popular, since Christians now were in the imperial favor. So the act declined in significance, and of course, through much of the early and late Middle Ages and even in the European expansion into the New World and Africa, baptism was often forcibly applied to hapless victims of imperial conquests. Baptism at the point of a sword was no doubt also a powerfully emotional experience, but the emotion inspired was probably terror rather than love for God and devotion to the way of Christ.

In more recent times, baptism has often been treated as simply a cultural rite of passage in those places or families in which church membership is part of the common cultural heritage. Though that trivialization of baptism as a sort of cultural rite of passage is still strong in some places, in general it's in rapid decline everywhere in what was formerly known as Christendom. Whole generations of people are now growing up without any contact with the institutional church at all, and baptisms that are merely routine rites of passage are declining.

In many respects, this is a healthy and positive development, because now in those places, and even here in America in many instances, baptism is again beginning to take on something of its original significance— an act that signifies a deep change in a person's life, and there is an increase in the number of adult seekers who are requesting baptism.

If baptism isn't merely a cultural rite of passage what is it? What is its meaning for us? We don't have the time to explore all the meanings, today, but let me briefly touch on three of the most important.

Baptism is, first of all, a sign of God's faithfulness to us and of God's claim upon our lives prior to any consciousness or decision on our part. Whether we are baptized as an infant or as an adult, our part in the transaction is always secondary, always in the nature of a response to God's initiative. In baptism we are given a new identity, a new name. Like the song we will sing as our closing hymn says, "we are rescued, we are claimed, we are loved and we are named." The song also speaks of being "like people who are drowned and brought to life again." That's why we rehearse the images of God's saving acts involving water in our baptismal liturgy. So when we pass through the waters of baptism, we testify to God's faithful love and gracious care for us, giving us a new identity and a new name. We are named children of God and given a seat at the family table.

That divine grace is the subject of our Old Testament lesson this morning. God says to his defeated and despondent people, "*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. Because you are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you, . . . do not fear, for I am with you.*" What a compelling and powerful vision that is! It not only affirms God's covenant of grace with us, prior to anything we do to deserve it, but also testifies to God's faithfulness to us even through our own sufferings, our own failures, our own infidelities. God claims us and sticks with us; that is always the primary meaning of our baptisms.

In those traditions which practice the baptism of children, it is God's side of the relationship which is most strongly emphasized. The aspect of human response is still present, however, in that the parents are asked to make

certain confessions of faith and certain promises to bring up their children so that will accept for themselves the gift of salvation. That's why the rite of confirmation was developed, to give the young person the chance to ratify for themselves, the grace given to them in their baptisms, and to be confirmed by their own decision to be disciples of Christ. And our response is important. God's choice of us is always primary, but our response to that choice is the other part of the equation.

It is that response, whether initially made for us by our parents, and ratified by us at confirmation or when we come to our baptisms at an age when we can make the response ourselves, that leads us to a second meaning of baptism. When we respond to God's grace in faith, we become part of a new human family, the community of those who confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, and who are committed to living under God's gracious and sovereign rule.

The New Testament writers often divided the world into two realms or kingdoms, which were characterized by certain powers or forces that act upon and shape human life. There are destructive and demonic powers that we can so easily see shaping our lives in this world— powers such as greed, the lust for power, violence, racism, nationalism and materialism. All of these powers are social in nature; they define and shape our relationships. In a world dominated by such powers, we cannot help but become persons who are selfish and violent and materialistic and racist. It's hard to grow up straight in a bent world. The biblical writers refer to these forces that shape us in bent and distorted ways as the powers of Sin and Death. As someone once said, "Sin is a social disease." Our relationships with others, as well as with ourselves are marked by alienation, strife, and ultimately violence.

The other realm that stands over against the powers of Sin and Death is also a social reality— a realm where God is the sovereign Lord rather than humans who are usurping God's rightful sovereignty. It is a realm where other

social forces are at work— powers such as justice, love, mercy, compassion, and peace. Baptism is the doorway between those two realms. When we respond to God's gracious choice and are baptized, we signal that we are moving to a new address. We are no longer a citizen of the kingdom of this world; we are becoming naturalized citizens of the kingdom of God. So St. Paul can say, "*God has transferred us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved Son.*" We change communities, we change our social location, and therefore, we choose to allow different powers to shape our lives. The earliest Christian confession on record, and one professed by the earliest Christians at their baptism, was the simple statement, "*Kyrios christos,*"— "Christ is Lord." Not Caesar, not Money, not Race or Nation, but Christ. And the character of the Lord determines the dynamics and creates the forces that determine and shape the persons we become.

That is why belonging to the visible Christian community is such a vital part of our being Christians. That's why "going to church" is so important (even if it is church in a high school auditorium)— not because going to church in itself makes us holy or earns us points in our favor, nor because it's where we get to socialize with our friends, or serve on committees, but because by going to church we identify with the community of people who are confessing that Christ is Lord, and who are opening themselves to the shaping and maturing and empowering work of God's spirit in their lives. Our calling is not only to be holy individuals, but to be a holy people, a people set apart for God's glory. In community, we become an alternative social reality. We become a sign of hope that love and compassion and reconciliation and forgiveness and peace are really possible as the dynamics in human relationships. These, we confess, are the powers that we want to shape our existence, rather than the powers of competitiveness, greed, or domination.

Finally, baptism equips and commissions us for ministry. This is the meaning of baptism that St. Luke particularly emphasizes in his account of Jesus' own baptism. Just as the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism, empowering him for his vocation, so the Holy Spirit comes upon us at our baptisms, empowering us for our vocation. That vocation is to represent the love of God in Jesus Christ to the world. It was the Spirit of God, in Jesus, that enabled him to undertake his ministry. That same Spirit is given to us in our baptisms to equip us with the same power to undertake our ministry.

Ministry— representing Jesus Christ— is the gift and calling of every Christian, and all Christians are called and equipped for that ministry at their baptisms. It was not professionally ordained clergy who, within little more than two hundred years after Jesus' crucifixion, were responsible for the presence of local congregations from Persia to India, from Greece to Spain. Ordinary Christian men and women, empowered by the Spirit, and committed to their vocations as ministers of the gospel, carried the message to the ends of the earth as they went about their normal business.

Being a minister doesn't mean standing on the street corner handing out tracts or doing a high-pressure sales job on other people; it means living faithfully according to the values of the kingdom of God *and "being ready at all times,"* as the author of 1 Peter says, *"to give an answer for the hope that lies within you, with gentleness and respect."* Being a minister doesn't require having a head full of theology or a seminary degree; it does require a will to do the will of God and to live out one's baptismal vocation as a disciple of Jesus. It doesn't require special brilliance or knowledge; it does require commitment and faithfulness to our calling.

It is said that every morning upon arising, Martin Luther would place his hand upon his own head and say, "I am baptized." In that one simple act, he was reminding himself of who he was, a

person loved and claimed by God, a member of a new human community brought into being by the resurrection of Christ, and a person empowered and equipped to represent Jesus Christ in the world. If we all would remind ourselves of those truths, we might again have the power, like the earliest Christians, to turn the world upside down. Or, perhaps, rather, to turn it rightside up.