

Baptism in Christ

Lent 1 2018

Genesis 9:8-17

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷ God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

1 Peter 3:18-22

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. ²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Mark 1:9-15

The Baptism of Jesus

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son with you I am well pleased.”

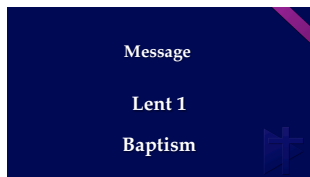
The Temptation of Jesus

¹² The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

Jesus Begins His Ministry

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand repent and believe in the gospel.”

Intro:



It's the first Sunday of Lent and the readings for today relate to baptism. The story the flood, the ark and God's covenant with Noah when things dry out establishes water and death by drowning as a metaphor for the death that comes when sin covers the earth. This imagery comes from a region like the central Netherlands known as 'Mesopotamia' or between-the-rivers where people lived with the threatening power of water in flood so it became a metaphor for death and destruction which we have to have in mind when considering baptism.

We then heard from Peter's first epistle where he refers to the Noah story as pointing to Jesus's death and resurrection. So Jesus, like the Ark of Noah –

“might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.”

He goes on to say:

²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

Finally we heard the account from Mark's Gospel of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. Mark says very little about the baptism itself but he describes what happened next:



¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son with you I am well pleased.”

As quickly as I can I need to point something out here. Baptism as pouring water over people or immersing them into water is not something Jesus, or Christians invented. Ritual washing was already part of the Jewish tradition and can be found in the Law of Moses. The priests washed before worshipping as a cleansing ritual. John the Baptist was offering a people an opportunity to seek cleansing from their sin in a baptism of repentance in readiness for God’s coming action in the coming One. People came repentant bringing their sins to the river and received cleansing.

Jesus submitted himself to this baptism in solidarity with sinful humanity and three things happened:

1. John saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove while hearing voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son with you I am well pleased.”
 - a. The reference to ‘like a dove’ is to the downward draught of a flapping bird not the physical form.
2. The Holy Spirit drove him into the wilderness to be tested.
3. Jesus began his ministry declaring, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand repent and believe in the gospel.”

This is how Jesus was prepared for his Kingdom ministry:

- submission to baptism of repentance
- being filled with the Holy Spirit with affirmation of his heavenly Father
- testing in the wilderness

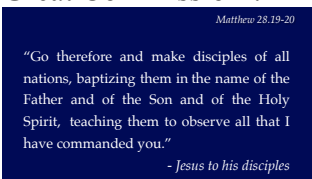
and then he was into it!

Engagement

So with that overview of today’s baptism themed readings let’s talk about our baptism.

Baptism is one of the two ritual acts or sacraments Jesus instructed his disciples to do. In some parts of the church these are known as ‘The Dominical Sacraments’ of Baptism and Holy Communion because they were instituted by the Lord himself.

To connect with this, here is a key text from the end of Matthew’s Gospel known commonly as ‘The Great Commission’.



¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

That is the parting instruction or ‘Great Commission’ Jesus leaves his disciples upon leaving them at his ascension.

To help us get into this let’s ask the ‘why question’. Could you huddle to share about why you think Jesus told his disciples to baptize people. What is Jesus’ purpose in this?

Development

To clear the ground a bit I will share all the wrong reasons I have heard in 25 years as to why parents bring a child, usually an infant, for baptism. So hold your thoughts about why Jesus set this up and hear ten reasons that have nothing to do with Jesus’ reasons for baptism.

- A. It's a naming ceremony, like christening a ship. This is an opportunity to formally and solemnly name a child in the presence of family and friends.
- B. It's necessary for the spiritual safety of the child. Unless they are baptized or christened they are vulnerable to evil forces and bad things could happen, thus an inoculation against evil spirits.
- C. Baptism removes original sin and so should a child die prematurely they die clean of sin and go to heaven and not hell.
- D. It makes them a member of the church and gets them registered so that one day they can get married, or if need be, buried in church - long term planning.
 - a. Denominational Identity may be a part of this?
- E. It's an opportunity to give thanks to God for the safe birth and hopefully the survival of the mother.
 - a. This used to be done as 're-churching of mothers'
- F. This is the wider family's welcome and celebration starting in church with a family party to follow.
- G. Tradition; this is what we do or it's the 'right' thing to do.
- H. So the child may grow up with Christian values.
- I. Grandparents expect it.
- J. It would be nice. 'Perhaps in the rose garden?'

Going back to what Jesus had in mind when he instructed his followers to baptize disciples in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Was any of this in his mind? I really don't think so! Yet, this is what baptism has often been reduced to.

As he was about to depart, Jesus stood before his disciples as the human, divine, crucified, risen messiah who represented and revealed the Father and promised the Holy Spirit saying; You go and make disciples the way I have disciplined you and drown them in that in the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Expanded: As my disciples you have had to learn to die and be re-born, transformed by my teaching and presence. You have seen me die and raised immortal. Go and disciple others in this way, My way, drowning them in my death and resurrection.

Q. So why baptism Jesus?

A. Just as Jesus humbled himself in a baptism of repentance in the Jordan to identify with all sin-soaked humanity, Jesus calls his disciples go the next step to humble themselves in the baptism he commands to identify with his death and resurrection. Not only is the believer's discipleship spiritually marked and sealed in this, but in a mysterious way one enters into Christ and shares his life in real time.

John offered the repentant a spiritual bath for cleansing from sin.

Jesus calls his disciples to their spiritual death and rebirth in him.

When this happens in mind, body and spirit, there is a mysterious yet powerful connection in Christ. It's as if we are replanted in Jesus with roots going into God.

Jesus offers his teaching in words and he offers his spirit to be received. The baptism event is the sign and seal of that being accepted.

To become human Jesus emptied himself of all his glory and divine majesty. For us to become like Jesus in his spirit we need to empty ourselves of all fallen humanity and let that die. That is what baptism represents for the disciple. That is what the 11 or people so standing on the hill side were told to make happen among all the nations in the assurance that Jesus would be with them as long as it took.

This is what Jesus was conveying when he said

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Today

So after 2000 years the end of the age has not yet come and the Spirit of Jesus is still with us. At the same time we are in very confused times and the way Christians practice baptism reflects this deep confusion. The way to clarity is to listen to Jesus. We are his sheep we need to listen to his voice. All the 10 reasons for baptism listed beforehand developed and took hold after Jesus and frankly, despite Jesus. They are a bit like celebrating Jesus and his Gospel while ignoring Jesus and his Gospel!

Part of this celebrating of Jesus and his Gospel while ignoring Jesus and his Gospel has been the neglect of discipleship and an over-emphasis on being church.

What has happened is that people have attempted to build God's church and called people to church in a way that undermined people coming to Jesus as his disciples as he specified them to come.

Baptism has been made more of a church event for church purposes in Christian societies instead of being a primarily Christ related event.

500 years ago as part of the Protestant Reformation some Reformers tried to address this. Notably in this country the so-called 'Anabaptists' (*NL: wederdopers*) led by Menno Simmons took a stand to try and reclaim baptism from church as society as it Christ meant it to be. At one point some of them were burnt alive in this country for this.

In subsequent centuries there were other 'believer's baptist' movements and lots of arguing about how much water, how old people need to be to have faith and just how do you discern when a person is a disciple ready to mark their death in Christ with baptism?

Some denominations accept baptism as an infant and others say it is invalid. This issue is alive today for people from a mainline background seeking to join any Baptist congregation.

So if this is confusing, sorry but it is. Lord, we have made a mess of it.

Application and Conclusion

To wrap this message up let me say two clear things:

Firstly, Jesus intended baptism to both spiritually and physically mark, sign and seal people as disciples immersed in him. It is the objective event in the process of conversion that marks coming to Jesus Christ as The Way, The Truth and The Life. Baptism is an embracing of his Cross and Resurrection as our new life.

In modern language I would say: A Christian is a baptized disciple.

or,

Baptism marks membership of the church as a disciple of Christ.

People may feel a member of the church because they sing in the choir or arrange the flowers. People may feel association because their family have worshipped somewhere for decades or even centuries. People may feel belonging because they know many people or enjoy the church community. But it really is baptism that marks the belonging in Christ and his Body with a capital B.

If 'church people' are not baptized one needs to ask, why?

How come when Jesus instructs his disciples to baptize their disciples there are adult believers who are not baptized but still want to be part of church?

How come when Jesus says to do something do people can have the attitude “I’ll do it when I feel ready?” as if personal timing is more important than simple obedience?

That is the same mindset that leads people to live together as if married but getting round to formalizing it can wait until convenient.

I would say: The obedient are always ready. If you are not ready for baptism it’s because you are not yet obedient to Jesus and that is possible but lets be clear about what is going on here.

Secondly, I want to say something to parents and prospective parents. There has been much debate about when baptism is or is not valid as if doing it wrong or using the wrong liturgy might ruin it. I trust God’s grace to cope with our failings.

The question of parents wanting to raise their children as disciples for Jesus is: What is pastorally wise? Given that you have somewhere between 10 and 16 years to disciple a child in today’s world, when would it be best for them, not the family, not the denomination, not the homeland church, not the grandparents, but for them? When would it be wise for them to receive baptism? I humbly suggest that it would not be in the first few years.

What you decide as parents is up to you. What I do want to impress on you is the question: What would be wise for parents wanting raise their children as disciples of Jesus?

To be continued... Next week some more on Baptism and Holy Communion as well.