

Remember Your Baptism

Mark 1:4-11

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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The text this morning is about the baptism of Jesus. As I reflected on baptism this past week, two stories came to mind:

A young man had come forward in church to receive the sacrament of baptism. As he was standing before the congregation with the pastor, the pastor turned and asked the young man, "Baptism is a serious step to take; are you prepared for this?"

"I think so," said the young man. "My wife has fixed appetizers, and we have a caterer coming to serve the meat and the vegetables."

"That's not what I mean," said the pastor. "I mean, are you prepared in spirit?"

"Oh, most definitely," said the young man. "We have a keg of beer and a case of whiskey just for the occasion."

There was also the time when a Baptist minister's young son decided he wanted to baptize the three family cats. The first two cats were mostly cooperative as the boy dunked them into the bathtub and then brought them back out. They were a bit miffed, but they didn't protest too much. The third cat, however, gave a great struggle. When the boy held the cat over the tub, the cat scratched and clawed and tore himself out of the boy's grip; as a result, the cat only got a small splash of water on it. As the cat was running away, the boy could be heard shouting, "Fine, go ahead and be a Presbyterian if that's what you want!"

There are few doctrines in the Christian church about which there are more disagreements and misunderstandings than the sacrament of baptism. From whether or not a person is to be immersed or sprinkled, or whether it is to be an infant or an adult believer, or whether one is to be baptized only once or more than once--there continues to be much debate between Christians of different denominations and traditions. I find that many of the people in the pews, and even some in the pulpits, come to some misunderstandings about baptism.

Often when people are baptized, they think they "have arrived," spiritually speaking. That is, they believe that their baptism marks the end of a long spiritual journey. In fact, some people will not consent to being baptized until they think they have their life together; they think that being baptized is about having everything figured out and having all your sinful days behind you.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Baptism is not the end of our journey--it is just the beginning. In the gospel accounts, the baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of his public ministry. Baptism is the first step we take in our discipleship, not the last.

Epiphany was this past Tuesday. In the liturgical calendar the Sunday after Epiphany is always the Sunday on which we commemorate the Baptism of the Lord. It is the inauguration of Jesus' ministry to bring God's kingdom to us. In the story Jesus, though he was without sin, nevertheless identified himself with sinners as he heeded John the Baptist's call to repentance and subsequent turning to God. Then Jesus was baptized, and as he came out of the water he received the Holy Spirit and heard the affirmation of God, "You are my Son, whom I

love; with you I am pleased.” And then in the two verses that follow this morning’s text, Jesus is sent into the wilderness for a time of testing.

On this day, the Christian church has typically used the baptism of the Lord as an occasion for us to remember our own baptisms, for our baptism is rooted in Christ and joins us to Christ and Christ’s ministry of reconciliation and obedient discipleship. Christ’s baptism becomes for us an occasion to remember that we were baptized into Christ, and therefore there is in this story of the baptism of our Lord a pattern for our own discipleship as we consider what it means to live into our own baptism. Specifically, there is in this morning’s text a call to repentance, an affirmation of acceptance, and an equipping to live a new life.

Mark tells us that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Biblical repentance is not the same as the guilt trip spin that contemporary preachers put on repentance. Repentance, quite simply, involves a turning from one way of life toward another way of life. It comes with the realization that the current way of doing things isn’t working, and you need to change directions in your life.

Our discipleship begins with repentance. It begins when we decide to turn to God for meaning and hope and salvation.

On September 10, 1998, a man stood before a large group of people gathered for a prayer breakfast. The first words out of his mouth were, “I don’t think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned.” Then he quoted from a book given him by a Jewish friend in Florida. The book is called *Gates of Repentance*.

The man read a passage from the book: “Now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red to orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the south. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter. For leaves, birds and animals, turning comes instinctively. But for us, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy. It means losing face. It means starting all over again. And this is always painful. It means saying I am sorry. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday’s ways.”

The man ended with this prayer: “Lord help us to turn, from callousness to sensitivity, from hostility to love, from pettiness to purpose, from envy to contentment, from carelessness to discipline, from fear to faith. Turn us around, O Lord, and bring us back toward you. Revive our lives as at the beginning and turn us toward each other, Lord, for in isolation there is no life.”¹

The man who spoke to the crowd was President Bill Clinton.

Whatever you may think of the man who uttered these words, his description of repentance is right on the mark. The Christian life begins when we realize that our old way of doing things is not effective, and that we need to turn to the way of grace, to the way of obedience to God, to the way of hope and faith.

Baptism is also an affirmation of acceptance. When Jesus was baptized, the heavens were torn open, and the voice of God called out, “You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.” We affirm the very same for ourselves when we are baptized. God claims us with his love. God says to you and me, “You are my beloved child.” In baptism we declare that God has claimed us as his children. It is the promise that God is near and God is personal, not some far-off indifferent deity. It is the promise of God’s care and love for us as family.

And baptism is a call to live a new way of life, a way of life empowered by God through the Holy Spirit. In the text from Mark’s gospel, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. In the same way, we affirm at our baptism that,

not only does God claim us as his children, but God also equips us to live obediently as his children. God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us, to inspire us, to strengthen us in our faith. As God's children, we are called to live a new way of life, a life informed by God's love and grace, a life guided by God's word. When we baptize, whether it is as adults or as infants, we are saying that life in the kingdom of God is marked by a different quality, and it is God who gives us the wherewithal to live according to that different quality through the Holy Spirit.

Sarah Jo Sarchet is a Presbyterian pastor who once served in Chicago. A 10 year-old boy in her congregation named Cameron, walked into her office and said he needed to talk to her. "I'd like to be baptized," he said. "We were learning about Jesus' baptism in Sunday School. The teacher asked the class who was baptized, and all the other kids raised their hands. I want to be baptized too."

Using her best pastoral care tone of voice, Sarah Jo said, "Cameron, do you really want to be baptized just because everyone else is?"

"No," he replied, "I want to be baptized because it means I belong to God."

The pastor was touched by the young boy's understanding. "Well, then," she said, "How about this Sunday?" His smile turned to concern and he asked, "Do I have to be baptized in front of all those people in the church? Can't I just have a friend baptize me in the river, like Jesus was baptized by his cousin John?"

Caught off guard, Sarah Jo conceded, "You have a point. But, if a friend baptized you in the river, how would the church recognize it?" At this point she was going to help Cameron understand how our Book of Order teaches that baptism ought to take place in public worship. But before she got a chance to say anything, Cameron quickly answered her question.

"I guess by my new way of living" he said.²

At baptism we affirm that as children of God we are called and equipped to live a new way of life. The Westminster Confession of Faith states that we need to remember that fact every day, that every day we need to examine our lives and see where we might "improve" our baptism. In remembering our baptism we reflect on the call to repentance, on what it means to be claimed by God's love, and on the life that God calls us to live.

As tradition has it, whenever Martin Luther felt his energy flagging, his doubt growing, or his fear strengthening, he would cry out, "I am baptized!" In that cry would be the renewal of strength to go forward on whatever journey he faced.³

Make that your rallying call: I am baptized! Do you find yourself thinking you need to turn your life in another direction? Remember your baptism, for you are a beloved child of God! Do you find yourself wondering about your own sense of self-worth and identity? Remember your baptism, for God has claimed you as one of his own! Do you find yourself thinking that you don't have what it takes to live as one of God's children? Remember your baptism, for God has given you the Holy Spirit to equip you for doing the work God has called you to do!

Remember your baptism, and hear the words that God speaks to you: "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased." Amen.

¹ From a weekly sermon illustration e-mail newsletter posted by Rev. Brett Blair, eSermons.com

² Sarah Jo Sarchet, "Set Up by the Spirit", preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, January 10, 1999. www.fourthchurch.org

³ Rochelle A. Stackhouse, in Lectionary Homiletics, December 2003 – January 2004, p. 51.