

Romans 6:1-11

Matthew 3:1-17

January 12, 2020

The Baptism of the Lord

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

SOMETHING IN COMMON WITH JESUS

Let us pray: Gracious God, as we turn to your Word for us, may the Spirit of God rest upon us. Help us to be steadfast in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing, and in our living. Amen.

When you climb the short staircase from the sanctuary on the second floor to the pastor's study on the third floor in the Stanley White Presbyterian Church in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, you pass three portraits. At the bottom is a familiar painting of the head of Jesus Christ. Halfway up, you see a portrait of the Rev. Stanley White, the first minister of the mission church and the man for whom the church was named when it was officially organized as a congregation in the mid-1960's. At the top of the staircase is a portrait of Mrs. Wyche, for years the undisputed matriarch of the church. Mrs. Wyche had already died by the time Nancy and I became co-pastors of the church, but her spirit was alive and well, especially in the stories and memories of the older members. Nancy and I used to jokingly refer to the three portraits as "The Holy Trinity."

When Nancy and I moved in the pastor's study on a September day in 1988, I cleaned off and organized the bookshelves as she cleaned out a small wooden desk. At one point she called to me, "Hey, take a look at this." She was holding a small, cobalt blue glass vial. It looked very, very old. The bottle had a dried-out, yellowed label on it. The ink had faded badly, but we were still able to read the words "Water from the River Jordan." Nancy shook the bottle and said, "It doesn't feel like there's anything in it." When we finally got the top off, we discovered the bottle was bone-dry.

The following Sunday, we asked one of the older members about the mysterious bottle. He said, "Oh, that! Mrs. Wyche went to the Holy Land years ago. She brought back some water from the River Jordan in that bottle. We used to put a drop or two in the baptismal font when we had a baptism." "But, there's nothing in the bottle," we said. He said, "Oh, yeah, it ran out years ago. We used to just fill it up from time to time from the kitchen faucet. I don't think Mrs. Wyche ever knew the difference!" Over the years, Nancy and I have laughed and wondered if (1) Mrs. Wyche was onto their subtle filling up of the water bottle or (2) Mrs. Wyche was astounded and mystified that the water from the River Jordan never ran out!

While there is certainly nothing wrong with putting a few drops of water from the River Jordan in the baptismal waters, most churches don't have easy access to such water (even if it miraculously never runs out!). Whenever I meet with our middle school students during Confirmation or with our elementary school students during Communion training, we talk about baptism. Part of the "hands-on" training about the sacra-

ment of baptism is to let them discover where we keep the silver bowl we use when we baptize someone in our church.

Once they have found the silver bowl, I ask, “Where do you suppose the water for baptism comes from?” It usually doesn’t take long for one of them to suggest “from the kitchen faucet?” That’s right — the waters of baptism in the Wallace Presbyterian Church come from the Wallace Water Department, in accordance with the instruction in our “Directory for Worship” that says, “The water used for Baptism should be from a local source, and may be applied with the hand, by pouring, or through immersion.” (*Book of Order*, W-3.0407)

Among the many meanings that are attached to this story about Jesus getting baptized, one stands out as being very meaningful and important for you and me. In his story, Matthew seems to indicate there were lots and lots of people milling around out there in the wilderness, near the Jordan River where John was preaching and baptizing. Imagine, if you will, Jesus being just one of the crowd that day, listening to John, patiently waiting in line for his turn to walk into the Jordan and get baptized by John.

Notice that John didn’t call any of his disciples over and say, “This next guy in line is special. Go over to the shore and get one of those jugs of special baptism water.” John obviously recognized Jesus, not only in appearance but in his person, because, at first he was reluctant to baptize Jesus. But Jesus cut off John’s protest and said, “It’s the right thing to do. Let’s get on with it.” Then Jesus went into the waters of baptism — the same waters that everyone else there that day would be baptized with — Pharisees and Sadducees, residents of Jerusalem and Judea and the region along the Jordan. Jesus was one of the crowd that, according to the gospel of Luke, included tax collectors and soldiers listening to John’s preaching and, apparently, waiting to be baptized.

In other words, that day in the Jordan River, Jesus identified with the common people. And, if he identified with the common people back then, surely he identifies with us common people still today. Think about that for a minute — we don’t often think about what we have in common with Jesus. Usually we talk about Jesus and God in other-worldly terms. We define who God and Jesus **are** by talking about what we **are not** — omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, all loving, etc., etc. But the mystery of Christmas which we just got through celebrating is that God sent his one and only begotten Son to be like us, so we could be like him.

During my years of ministry, I have baptized many people, ranging in age from newborn babies to full-grown adults. Not once have the heavens opened and a dove descended on the person who was being baptized. Nor have I ever heard a heavenly voice call down, “This is my son/daughter, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” So, how can we say that Jesus’ baptism and our own baptisms have anything in common?

Well, we can be glad that Jesus wasn’t swayed by John’s protest, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” For Jesus’ baptism is the foundation for our Christian lives and every commitment we make to God. Consider the powerful images and language used in the Bible and in our understanding of baptism:

- * we are set free from sin
- * we are marked as Christ's own
- * we are sealed by the Holy Spirit
- * we are set apart for a life of service
- * we are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus
- * we are pardoned, cleansed, and renewed
- * we are incorporated into the body of Christ
- * we are called to repentance, faithfulness, and discipleship

As one writer has put it, "Baptism is a dynamic, present tense activity, not a quaint ritual or ceremony."¹ We may not actually hear a heavenly voice echoing through this sanctuary when someone is baptized, but God's voice speaks to us through Jesus' baptism, our own baptism, and whenever we witness a baptism. When I put the common water on the baby's head or the teenager's head or the adult's head, I call the person by two names — the name given to him or her by earthly parents and the name bestowed through God's grace in Jesus Christ, the name "child of the covenant."

I get a chill when I say the ancient words of baptism — "Child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Then I follow up those words with this promise and commission, no matter how old the person is: "Child of the covenant, in baptism, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit, marked as God's own forever, and called to follow Christ in mission."

It has been said that "baptism matters because it tells us *who* we are by reminding us *whose* we are: God's beloved child."² I would add that baptism also tells us *what* we are to do. When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan, his public ministry was getting ready to begin. He was commissioned to the job God called him and sent him to do. In that sense, we have a lot in common with Jesus when it comes to baptism. If we take our baptisms seriously throughout life as "a dynamic, present tense activity, not a quaint ritual or ceremony," it can make all the difference in the world. As the apostle Paul says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:3-4, 11)

What else do we have in common with Jesus when it comes to baptism? Think again about Jesus waiting in line by the banks of the Jordan River. Think about his obedience to the will of God by being baptized. Think about the life of ministry and service he embarked upon when he came up out of the waters of baptism. As one source says, "In his own baptism, Jesus identified himself with sinners — yet God claimed him as a beloved Son, and sent the Holy Spirit to anoint him for service." When Jesus sent his disciples out to baptize and teach, "the disciples were empowered by the outpouring of the Spirit to continue Jesus' mission and ministry, inviting others to join this new way of life in Christ."

Now think about your own baptism, even if you can't remember it because you were just a baby in a minister's arms many years ago. What we have in common with

Jesus in baptism is that “Through Baptism, Jesus Christ calls us to repentance, faithfulness, and discipleship. Baptism marks the beginning of new life in Christ. The new way of life to which God calls us is one of deep commitment, disciplined discernment, and growth in faith. The gift of the Holy Spirit, given with and through Baptism, equip and strengthen us for the challenges of Christian faith and life.”³

As I was reading for this sermon, I came across an article about all of the many names we are called in life: mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, rich, poor, Democrat, Republican, conservative, liberal, local, outsider, and on and on. The writer observed that all of the other names and labels you are called **describe** who you are, but only one name, the name you receive at baptism, **defines** who you are — beloved child of God. And only that name “grants us the life we enjoy in Christ.”⁴

Because we enjoy life in Christ through our common baptism, we are called and empowered to share Jesus Christ’s common ministry of justice and righteousness. As Jesus told John there in the River Jordan, “It’s the right thing to do!”

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, you have blessed us and adopted us as your own beloved children. Through the water of baptism, you bring us healing and reconciliation, nourishment and cleansing. As we hear about our Lord’s baptism, may we be reminded of our own baptisms, and celebrate our joyous connection with you, Almighty God, as your beloved children. Amen.

NOTES

¹David Lose, “Baptism of Our Lord: A Family Name,” January 4, 2017, at www.davidlose.net.

²Ibid.

³All citations in this paragraph are from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Order* 2017-2019, W-3.0402: Theology of Baptism.”

⁴Lose.