

**Acts 10:34-48**

**Matthew 3:1-17**

**January 8, 2023**

***The Baptism of the Lord***

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

**I AM BAPTIZED!**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

In October 2008, I began participating in The Pastor as Spiritual Guide program, sponsored by the Center for Congregational Health which is affiliated with the Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center. The initial group had about twelve or thirteen ministers, the majority of which were Baptists from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. After the first two years, seven of us remained connected and met regularly for overnight retreats. By that time, it was six Baptists and a Presbyterian (sounds like the start of a joke, doesn't it?). Sadly, our beloved friend and leader, David, died in April of last year. The remaining six of us continue to be a support group for each other.

After our group had been together for quite some time, one day we were eating lunch at the Avila Retreat Center in Durham. One of my Baptist colleagues turned to me and asked, "Phil, how do you baptize somebody?" The other Baptists said, "Yeah, tell us!" To be honest, I was surprised, so I said, "Guys, you mean to tell me we've been together all this time and you don't know that we Presbyterians sprinkle people!" One of them said, "No, not that. We understand the theology. We want you to explain the logistics. What do you actually do when you baptize someone?" To which I replied, "I'll tell you how I do it if you tell me how you do it!" That eventually led to our sharing some interesting and possibly embarrassing baptism mishaps (more from them than from me).

When Nancy baptized our niece at the Lake Waccamaw Presbyterian Church, Kelsey's grandfather, who was a Ruling Elder, told us a good baptism story. He was the elder in charge one Sunday when there was to be a baptism. He went to the church on Saturday afternoon to make sure everything was set up and ready for worship the next day. When he lifted the cover off the baptismal font, he noticed the water was kind of murky with a layer of greenish scum on top. He figured it hadn't been emptied since the last baptism, so he took the bowl to the kitchen, rinsed it out, put fresh, clean water in the bowl, returned it to the sanctuary, and put the lid on. The next morning, as he stood with the parents who were presenting their baby for baptism, he heard the minister talk about how special Lake Waccamaw was to the parents — so special, in fact, they had asked him to put some lake water in the baptismal bowl for their baby's baptism. Mr. Mills said, "You should have seen the minister's face when he lifted the lid off." Then he added, "I never did tell them what I had done. In fact," he said, "I've never told anybody about that until just now."

When 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 sacrament 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) We may add water from some other sources such as a special lake or the Sea of Galilee, but that’s not what makes baptism meaningful. The emphasis in baptism is always on what God has done and continues to do in our lives through Jesus Christ.

Among the many meanings that are attached to this story about Jesus getting baptized, one stands out as being very 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."<sup>1</sup> 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."

It has been said that "baptism matters because it tells us *who* we are by reminding us *whose* we are: God's beloved child."<sup>2</sup> 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, faith-

fulness, 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, equips and strengthens us for the challenges of Christian faith and life.”<sup>3</sup>

Think about all of the many names we are called in life: mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, husband, wife, 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.”<sup>4</sup>

When I baptize someone, I ask you all to remember your own baptisms, even if you can’t actually remember the event itself. Here’s a powerful story about what a difference remembering we are baptized can make. When Martin Luther was “thrust into the role of a leader of the new Protestant movement – when all he had ever wanted to do was reform the Church, not found a new one – he lived a turbulent life, constantly debating his opponents and in danger from the authorities. He translated the whole Bible into German while holed up in an ally’s castle to avoid being captured or killed. Not surprisingly, he was often plagued with fear and anxiety, and with doubt and discouragement about whether any of this would ever bear fruit.

“When all of this started to get Luther down, he had a unique strategy: he would stand up, face down the devil that he believed to be tormenting him, and yell, ‘I am baptized!’ He was also known to throw ink pots across the room. Some sources indicate that he would write the same phrase ‘I am baptized’ in chalk on his desk, to remind himself, as he worked, of his unbreakable connection to Christ and to the communion of saints.”<sup>5</sup>

When Nancy and I graduated from seminary, my mother gave each of us a book called “My Pastoral Record.” Almost forty years later, it’s interesting to look back through the record book at the baptisms, weddings, and funerals and remember and think about all of those people. The youngest child I ever baptized was five weeks old. Now he’s a twenty-seven year old college graduate. The first person I ever baptized was a teenaged girl in a Confirmation class at the First Presbyterian Church in Rocky Mount, NC in the early 1980’s. She must be in her 50’s now. Then there’s Kevin, who was two months old when I baptized him. He was our son Jackson’s best friend at the Stanley White Presbyterian Church in Roanoke Rapids, NC. Kevin is an officer in the United States Coast Guard, married, with two children. I have a picture in my pastoral record book of me holding two-month old Kevin. I don’t know if any of them or the other people I have baptized over the years have ever thrown an ink pot across the room or written “I am baptized” in chalk on a desk, but their baptisms testify to their unbreakable connection to Christ and to the communion of saints.

The next time we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism, remember your own baptism as you listen carefully to these words: “Child of the covenant, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit, marked as God’s own forever, and called to follow Christ in mission.”

As we sing our closing hymn this morning, remember your own baptism as you sing these words: “Baptized in water, sealed by the Spirit, marked with the sign of Christ our King; born of the Spirit, we are God’s children; joyfully now God’s praises we sing.”

Every day — especially when you are plagued with fear and anxiety and with doubt and discouragement — remember your unbreakable connection to Christ and to the communion of saints. And always, always remind yourself, “I am baptized!”

***Let us pray: Righteous God, you sent your son Jesus to be baptized by John in the Jordan, so that all might hear the proclamation of your love. Make us voices of proclamation, so that all might know of your love through our words and our actions. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>David Lose, “Baptism of Our Lord: A Family Name,” January 4, 2017, at [www.davidlose.net](http://www.davidlose.net).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

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

<sup>4</sup>Lose.

<sup>5</sup>Grace Pritchard Burson, “I Am Baptized!” January 10, 2021 at [www.gracepritchardburson.net](http://www.gracepritchardburson.net).