

*From the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Schooley's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, January 8, 2023 - Baptism of the Lord*

Baptism of the Lord Sunday definitely gets the short end of the stick. It's nestled right after Epiphany, which occurs 12 days after Christmas. Epiphany isn't even all the popular, except that the story of the Magi and the hymn "We Three Kings of Orient Are" are both beloved. But, c'mon, by Baptism of the Lord Sunday – in the dead of winter, after all the hubbub of Advent and Christmas, coming around the same time as your credit card bill that contains December's marathon spending arrives – yeah, no one is paying a lick of attention to Baptism of the Lord Sunday. And that's a crying shame.

Obstinate contrarian that I am, I might like Baptism of the Lord Sunday more than Christmas. The contest, at first blush, doesn't seem like a fair fight, but imagine if we adorned this Sunday with all the festivities of Christmas – all the chocolate and gifts and lights and days off from work. It could become a true rival. I mean, the gift opportunities alone are wonderful. Like, every year we'd give our loved ones some sort of water-centered gift as part of the tradition. Dad gets a new garden hose. Mom gets an ice machine, you know that type that makes those little nuggets of ice that are easily chewable – "nuggy ice" as we call it in my house. Who here knows the glories of that nuggy ice? Anyway, kids get water balloons for later in the year. The super-rich will probably corrupt the intention of this holiday by taking vacations to blue-watered locales in honor of Baptism of the Lord, but the rest of us will get real creative on how to blend this water emphasis into our gift giving. I mean, I don't want to give away what I would like, but I will note that beer is 95-percent water. Just sayin'.

So, well, that's not going to happen and it's not going to take off. Christmas is safe, but I would like to make one last appeal for the importance of this day, namely that the authors of the four gospels would all seem to agree that Baptism of the Lord trumps Christmas since only two of those authors – Matthew and Luke – even bother with a birth narrative for Jesus, but all four contain His baptism. I know, it's glib to play that sort of Bible card. I'm sorry. I just feel bad for this liturgical day that's been pushed to the margins in our collective thinking and practices. I want better for it. I want to

hear it rise up and say, "No one puts Baby in the corner." But if it did that, folks would get confused because, like, isn't Christmas about the baby?

This is, at any rate, where I'm at emotionally as I present my appeal for this day. I'm in a defensive posture, which means I'm going to be a real bulldog for all the glories and meaning and importance for this day. It means I'm going to be painstakingly thorough in my presentation of it, which hopefully I can offset rhetorically with dated pop culture references and imagined gifts of beer. You know, my normal schtick.

Three points – you know it's a painstaking Presbyterian sermon if it has three points – are important to understand about the event of Jesus' baptism and why we remember it today. First, it connects Jesus's new covenant with Israel's old covenant. Second, it connects Jesus with humanity – with us – in all our brokenness, sinfulness, and evil. Third, it is a metonym for the Kingdom Jesus introduces throughout His ministry.

First, then, baptism is a Jewish ritual. It predates Jesus and even John the Baptist. This is a fact easily missed since baptism would appear to almost be invented by John the Baptist, but that just can't be the case. And that can't be the case because John is weird and almost no one will follow a weird guy into the wilderness to be shoved under the muddy waters of the River Jordan if there wasn't some sort of historical antecedent for this practice, right? I mean, would you? Would you follow John? I might. And that's not a brag. I only say this because when I was a freshman at Kent State, I was just hanging out, doing nothing in my dorm room when one of my hallmates appeared in my doorway, shirtless, and said, "Come with me." This is a seminal moment in my life because I learned something about myself that day. I learned that if a shirtless dude (who, I would later discover, was tripping on 'shrooms) says, "Come with me," I will unflinchingly do so.

Well, he didn't try to baptize me in muddy waters of the Cuyahoga River that day – we mostly just walked around a little wooded area beside the Honors dorms until I got bored and he forgot I was with him – but the point is that John the Baptist would've never had the crowds he garnered

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following him if he wasn't utilizing a previously-established and well-known spiritual practice. Baptism, in Israel's history, was a form of purification – an atonement of sorts – and one that didn't require the sacrifice of animal or produce. It could also be used as a form of recommitment to faithfulness – a washing away of the old to put on the new. In that, it is like our own New Years resolutions.

Jesus' actual ministry – His preaching, teaching, healings, exorcisms, and all the rest – do not (maybe cannot) occur until He is baptized. He, too, has to enter into this ritual of new life, of renewed commitment before all the rest can begin. And since so much of what He will do will feel like a break from Judaism – enough so that, you'll remember, the Jewish authorities are concerned that He's a heretic – it is significant that Jesus doesn't begin the "new" until He has engaged the "old." If you've ever wondered why there is an "Old Testament" and a "New Testament" – and, more so, why they are married together as Christian scriptures – I think the beginning of that occurs in Jesus' baptism.

Of course, Jesus doesn't *need* to be baptized the way the rest of John's baptizees did. Baptism, again, is for purification and Jesus is already pure. Our confession of Him is that He was like us in every way except that He was without sin. Well, for better or for worse, none of us are known apart from our sin. Sin is pretty pervasive. Even the best parts of ourselves are tainted with it. For example, I like to think that my sharp, thoughtful mind is one of the best parts of myself, but I'm well-aware how tainted it is with my own hubris and ego. Or, as another example, I'd like to think that my humor is one of the best parts of myself, but I'm very well-aware how tainted it is by my own insecurity – that is, by my sense that I'm unloved, maybe unlovable, except to the degree that I can perform and delight others. And I'm not alone in this. If you probed into yourself, you'd find that same pattern. It's the pattern that results in the reality that every person's greatest strength is also their greatest weakness.

Well, we just got done celebrating the incarnation of God at Christmas, which is important because it means that God is one of us (as that dated

pop song crooned a quarter-century ago, albeit in interrogative form). But merely taking the form of a human isn't really identifying with us, right? Not the fullness of us. Not the nuances in us. Not the struggles and challenges of finding even our best parts run through with our worst parts. And so, as our second point, Jesus is baptized to further and fully identify with us in all our feebleness, all our brokenness, yes, in all our sinfulness. Paul writes about Jesus as the one who was without sin, but who became sin for us. Paul has in mind Jesus' crucifixion when he writes this, but I think he could just as easily have meant Jesus' baptism. The one who needed no purification gets purified for us.

It's hard work identifying with those who are different, who are "other." I say this as a cis-hetero pastor in a church with wonderful, beautiful, faithful gay, lesbian, trans, and nonbinary members. I know – I experience existentially – the chasm between our lived existences. And the inverse is true too. Simply put, where there is difference and diversity, we're going to have some cross-cultural translation challenges – not problems, but challenges. Well, so I suppose it is for Jesus, who is fully human like us, but who is also fully God... most assuredly *not* like us. This baptism, then, is a symbol, a gesture, toward bridging that chasm. Theologians talk about God as "wholly Other." They also talk about God's love driving God to build that bridge between God and us. Baptism, then, is a sacrament precisely to the degree that it is God's loving initiative to be fully present with us.

Of course, as much as baptism starts as a Jewish ritual of purification, once Jesus enters those waters, He changes the ritual. He enhances it. He dignifies it. He expands it from "ritual" to "sacrament." We know this is true because in Acts – the story of the early church – we discover some disciples who have received John's baptism, but not Jesus' baptism. It is only when they are baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit that they also receive the Holy Spirit and become Christians – literally "little Christs."

Now, this transformation of baptism would seem to undercut my initial claim that baptism is what links the old and new covenants – that is, the promises and work of God to Israel and the

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promises and work of God through Jesus – but this transformation of baptism is better understood as Jesus keeping one foot firmly planted on the foundation established in the old covenant as He pushes forward into the new. So understood, then, we come to our third point, which is that Jesus' baptism is representative of this new Kingdom.

First, this new Kingdom is gentle and peaceable. Our Isaiah reading notes that God will bring forth justice to the nations. In our world, we tend to think we can bomb and sanction our way to justice, though history repeatedly reveals the folly of these attempts. Jesus, however, doesn't lift his voice, doesn't even break the already-bruised reed, doesn't snuff out even the dimmest, flickering flame. This is good news for us. Who here doesn't feel like their flame flickers dimly from time to time? Who here doesn't feel bruised? These waters of baptism – Jesus' baptism – reveal that even our dim, bruised parts of life will be embraced, nurtured, loved, and restored.

Second, Jesus initiates His ministry from the margins of society. To be sure, while Israel was occupied by Roman forces at this time, they still had their Temple. The Temple is where the Holy of Holies is. The Temple is where we'd expect anything new God is doing to originate. But Jesus doesn't begin in the Temple. Jesus begins in the muddy waters of the River Jordan. Jesus doesn't begin by recruiting the established religious authorities of His day. Jesus begins by following the lowly laity out into the wilderness. Those lowly laity who had followed John the Baptist – all covered in camel hair and eating his pro-keto diet of locusts and honey like a frat bro – into the wilderness because they are desperate, but hopeful. Jesus originates His ministry, begins ushering in the very Kingdom of God, with desperate, but hopeful people. And this too is Good News for us, for who here doesn't feel, at least at times, a little desperate, but still hopeful? Who here doesn't see all the world's problems, but somehow still find resiliency to hope for fruitfulness, beauty, and peace? That's the right spiritual disposition to have because that's the disposition Jesus privileges by beginning where He does.

Friends, I hope you had a wonderful Christmas. I hope that God's peace, hope, joy, and love overflowed in your lives. I hope that the warmth of that season is still with you. But don't feel like it's your duty to try to hold onto that all year long. First, you just probably won't be able to. That's a Herculean task; maybe even a Sisyphean one. Instead, remember your baptism. Remember that you have been marked, claimed, and sealed as Christ's own. Remember that in baptism God has bridged all the divides you from God. Remember that your baptism covered your bruised, dim parts of life. Remember that in baptism, you have been graced all you need to resist evil and pursue the joy of your Lord. Now, who wants to start a tradition of celebrating this day not by popping bottles of champagne, but of bubbly water? [Drink sparkling water] Yeah, we should definitely emphasize this day more.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.