

Our Saviour's Baptism

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, we celebrate and remember the baptism of Jesus.

The people that gathered at the Jordan River with John the Baptist were “filled with great expectation.” They believed that something amazing and good would soon be happening.

Word had spread that he was a prophet, something they had not had in hundreds of years. Finally, one of God's servants was proclaiming the best news imaginable: The Messiah, the Savior of the world was coming!

John was his forerunner, preparing the way, explaining the need for everyone to repent. And John didn't mince words, telling them they all fell short in following God's commandments. The people knew truth when they heard it; their hearts were convicted. They were marked and marred by sin. They needed a Savior.

After repenting, people came, one after another, toward the waters where John baptized them. John's role was to unflinchingly explain what it would mean to be part of the coming Kingdom, to be among those who believed in and followed the Messiah.

When the waters of baptism touched the people John baptized, very few likely understood the broad, bold plans God had for their lives. They were focused on the excitement of the water covering them, and others looking on with joy. Each who stood in line for their turn must have felt great “anticipation”. Every farmer and tax collector, every soldier and house servant, along with orphans, prostitutes and merchants. Young, old and all between, people were baptized.

Then, Jesus arrived on the scene. Eyes turned, heads too. Whispers were heard; the stir caused John to look up and find the source of the

excitement. Jesus stood at the end of the line leading into the river. He was there to be baptized.

Have you ever been curious or confused by that? We wonder, why did God's own "perfect" Son come forward to be baptized? Now I know that Jesus came because he was fully God, but also fully human. He wore flesh, becoming one of us. He was without sin but one day he would hang on a cross taking our sins on himself. Theologians call this "The Great Exchange" – our human sinfulness is exchanged in full for the holiness of our Savior. We will talk about this more in a minute.

Another thing I've been curious about, and maybe you have too. Have you ever wondered what God's voice sounds like? We're told that a voice from heaven declared "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." Was the voice deep, or soft – commanding, or tender?

We do know that God was letting the world know of his delight in and love for his son. God's affirmation marked the beginning of Christ's ministry.

Those in the crowd that day would never imagine that a little more than 3 years later, another baptism would touch Jesus' followers. We recognize it as the gift of the Holy Spirit. For some it looked like fire resting over their heads.

This was God's gift, his own spirit taking up residence in believers. The Holy Spirit is our power source for living, serving and witnessing. John made it clear that he only baptized with water; that was an outward, visible symbol of a person's inward commitment. But Christ anoints, or baptizes his people, with inward, lasting power.

In today's church we still baptize people. As Presbyterians we are known for baptizing infants and little ones, while there have certainly been occasions of adult baptisms.

We call Baptism a sacrament that initiates us into the church. It is the

official starting point on a lifelong spiritual journey. That is why baptisms are done during worship, unless there are special circumstances. Those already baptized need to be present so they can also take vows to help nurture the life and faith of the newest among them. It's an exciting celebration to witness the widening of the circle we call the Body of Christ.

Of course, Jesus wasn't baptized as an infant because in Jewish culture baptism was entirely an adult affair. As far as we can tell from the historical record, baptism was practiced by the Jewish people of Jesus' time when non-Jewish adults wanted to join the Jewish people and when Jewish people wanted to express repentance and the beginning of a new life dedicated to God.

Jesus was born Jewish, a descendant of King David, and we also believe that he was without sin and that, as God in the flesh, he had no need of a renewal of his relationship with God as we do. So why would Jesus be baptized?

The answer to that question points us to a deeper spiritual reality about what baptism is. Baptism is a washing away of sin, but it is also something more. There are at least two other important aspects of the spirituality of baptism that are very relevant to the life of Jesus and help us better understand why he was baptized.

One is the fact that baptism is a commissioning to ministry and the other is that baptism is an immersion into the life of God the Trinity.

First, the spirituality of baptism as the beginning of ministry. Jesus' baptism is the only commissioning to ministry that he receives – we have no record of him ever being ordained as a rabbi and, of course, he was never ordained as a minister since the church didn't even exist until after his ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

This moment in the Jordan river with John is the moment in all four gospels when Jesus' ministry begins, it is the moment when God the Holy Spirit

anoints him for ministry and God the Father affirms his calling and commissioning to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is coming into the world.

Since this is true of Jesus it is also true of us because we are included with him in his relationship with God and in his ministry to the world. Baptism is the commissioning to ministry for all of us as Christians just as it was for Jesus. Other forms of commissioning, like ordination to the ministry is all secondary to our baptism.

The same is true for each of you. By your baptism you have confessed (or your family have done so on your behalf) of your faith in Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior, and the promise to be a faithful disciple.

This points us to the second aspect of what baptism is. It is an immersion into the life of God the Trinity. In the baptism of Jesus, we see all three persons of the Trinity: the Father speaks from heaven, the Son is in the flesh as the man Jesus, and the Holy Spirit descends as a dove.

It is at this moment that the baptism of Jesus becomes an Epiphany for us, because not only do we see the persons of God we also see human nature itself included in God.

How is human nature being included in God's nature? Because in this story the Son is immersed into human nature through the incarnation as the man Jesus. This results in an image of God in humanity and humanity in God that is an Epiphany for us.

It is an Epiphany which reveals that, through Christ, humanity has been immersed – we have been baptized – into the very life and existence of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

These two aspects of Jesus' baptism help us understand that Christ is being baptized for us. Jesus isn't baptized because he needs it but because we need it. Jesus is baptized to grant us that moment of Epiphany when we realize that through Christ we have been adopted into the life of

God and commissioned with him to share this good news of humanity's adoption with the rest of the world.

If we stop to think about it, we can take great comfort from this revelation of our inclusion in God's life. Part of the struggle of faith is that we often do not see or feel God's presence very clearly in our day to day lives.

Jesus' life was the same. In fact, the gospels record only two occasions when he heard the Father's voice and saw the Spirit's presence manifested in such a clear way: here at his baptism and again at his transfiguration.

From day-to-day Jesus walked by faith and lived by prayer, just as we do. The good news of this Epiphany is the good news of God's faithful and abiding presence in our lives even when we do not see, hear, or feel a strong manifestation of that presence.

Because the Son of God has been baptized into our human nature, we have been baptized with him into God's divine nature. Because Christ has been baptized for us, we can trust that we are inseparably and forever included in God's life. Amen.