

# Baptism is the Starting Point, not the Finish Line

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
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January 10, 2021—The Baptism of Jesus

- Mark 1:4-11 Good News Translation <sup>4</sup>So John appeared in the desert, baptizing and preaching. “Turn away from your sins and be baptized,” he told the people, “and God will forgive your sins.” <sup>5</sup>Many people from the province of Judea and the city of Jerusalem went out to hear John. They confessed their sins, and he baptized them in the Jordan River.  
<sup>6</sup>John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He announced to the people, “The man who will come after me is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to bend down and untie his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”  
<sup>9</sup>Not long afterward Jesus came from Nazareth in the province of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw heaven opening and the Spirit coming down on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you.”
- Romans 6:1-11 Common English Bible <sup>1</sup> So what are we going to say? Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply? <sup>2</sup> Absolutely not! All of us died to sin. How can we still live in it? <sup>3</sup> Or don't you know that all who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> Therefore, we were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life. <sup>5</sup> If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> This is what we know: the person that we used to be was crucified with him in order to get rid of the corpse that had been controlled by sin. That way we wouldn't be slaves to sin anymore, <sup>7</sup> because a person who has died has been freed from sin's power. <sup>8</sup> But if we died with Christ, we have faith that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> We know that Christ has been raised from the dead and he will never die again. Death no longer has power over him. <sup>10</sup> He died to sin once and for all with his death, but he lives for God with his life. <sup>11</sup> In the same way, you also should consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus.

Have you been baptized? Do you remember your baptism? Many don't actually remember being baptized because they were babies at the time. Maybe you know you are baptized simply because you were told that you were baptized, or you have a certificate acknowledging your baptism. Your parents – or some other guardians – made the decision to have you receive the Christian sacrament of baptism. Why did they do that?

For some, having a child baptized is a rite of passage – it's just what you do. Perhaps your family has handed down a lovely baptismal gown that every baby for three generations has worn for baptism. You baptize the baby, then you have a luncheon for the extended family and friends – that's the way your family has always done it, and so you carry on the tradition. Some view baptism primarily as a rite of passage.

There are some people who jokingly refer to baptism as “fire insurance.” They want to baptize sooner rather than later because they worry that one who would die unbaptized risks a destiny in the fires of Hell... which has never made sense to me because what could a baby do

to warrant eternal damnation? But the fear of a baby going to Hell... that's a real motivator for some people to have a child baptized.

Some seek baptism for their infant as a way of acknowledging God's grace and generosity. Their promise to seek God's will for their child is reminiscent of the Old Testament story of Hannah in 1 Samuel Chapter 1. She dedicated her firstborn son Samuel to the Lord's service because she was so thankful that God gifted her with the ability to bear a son.

In the Presbyterian tradition, when a child is baptized, the parents or guardians promise to raise the child to know and love and serve Jesus Christ. What's more, the congregation promises to support the parents in that lifelong task. You have become a servant of Jesus Christ because of the example and guidance and encouragement of sisters and brothers in the faith—some with us still, others who have died and been resurrected. Following and serving Jesus Christ is not a solitary act; we are accompanied by what the Bible calls a "cloud of witnesses" in this world and the next. That's what baptism means to Presbyterian Christians.

What did Mary and Joseph do for Jesus? They didn't have their infant son baptized because that sort of baptism simply didn't exist yet. They did follow the Jewish practice described in Leviticus Chapter 12 by having Jesus dedicated in the Jerusalem Temple when he was forty days old.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was well into his adult years when he decided on his own to submit to the ritual of baptism—Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus was thirty years old. What did baptism mean at that time in the Jewish faith? It meant either conversion or repentance:

- People who were converting to Judaism would be "immersed in water, usually in a nearby river, as a sign of cleansing."<sup>2</sup> So baptism could signal a conversion to the Jewish faith.
- But we also know from the gospels that an itinerant preacher named John earned the nickname "the Baptist." John baptized people who accepted his call to clean up their lives by repenting of their former sinful ways and asking God for forgiveness and a new beginning. Baptism could signal a desire to repent.

Well, Jesus wasn't converting to Judaism, so that's not why he was baptized.

Nor did Jesus need to clean up his life by repenting of sinful ways.

Why did Jesus ask to be baptized by John? It must be because Jesus was ready to begin a new chapter in his life.

Well, so what *was* the "old chapter" of his life? We don't know much at all about Jesus in his early years.

- Of course, we know the stories describing his birth—we just heard those familiar stories again in recent weeks.
- The gospels tell us that the infant Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day as was the custom.
- I mentioned the child's dedication ceremony in the Jerusalem Temple at the age of forty days.
- There's one story in the gospels about Mary and Joseph looking all over town for their twelve-year-old son, only to find Jesus in the Temple engaged in deep discussion with the teachers of scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 12:1-5

<sup>2</sup> Pat Alexander, ed. Eerdmans' Family Encyclopedia of the Bible. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978, p. 98

But other than those incidents, we aren't told anything about the childhood, youth, or even young adulthood of Jesus. The gospels have people referring to Jesus as "the carpenter's son," so we presume that Jesus learned the trade from Joseph and worked as a carpenter.

Still, all the while, Jesus must have pondered God's call in his life. From an early age he must have sensed God calling him to a distinctive way of relating to God and to others. Remember what twelve-year-old Jesus said to his worried parents when they found their child discussing theology with the Temple's teaching staff? He said, "Why did you have to look for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"<sup>3</sup> Yes, Jesus sensed that his life would take a new path someday.

And now, at the age of thirty, Jesus was ready to begin a new chapter in his life.

Picture Jesus walking down the weed-covered banks of the Jordan River. He removed his outer tunic, then waded into the flowing waters of the Jordan, meeting John standing in water up to his waist. Jesus kneeled. John put a hand on Jesus' back and another on his head. John lowered his shoulders and head into the waters and back up again, then helped Jesus to his feet. Mark's gospel reports that *in that moment* Jesus envisioned heaven being revealed to earth, and God's spirit being sent down upon him as clearly as if a dove flew down from a tree branch overhanging the river.

That was not the end of a chapter in the life of Jesus. Baptism signaled the start of something new.

That's what our baptisms signal for us: the start of something new. Let's ponder that for a moment. Baptism is not something that we "get done," something to check off our list and get behind us. Your baptism is not the finish line; it's the starting line. Being baptized is the starting point for your commitment to serve God's will with your life, to serve God's will with your thoughts and words and deeds.

Whether your baptism was a few years ago or many decades ago, its significance didn't conclude when your forehead was towed off or when you changed from a wet baptism gown into dry street clothes. By God's grace your baptism even long ago gives you a fresh start today:

- Starting today you can resolve to be more grateful to God in all circumstances, and even despite some circumstances.
- Starting today you can try to see or hear or feel a situation from the other person's perspective.
- Starting today you can ask God to give you clarity to discern how your ego or self-centeredness shows disregard or causes emotional hurt for others.
- Starting today you can choose to embrace your identity first and foremost as a child of God dedicated to serving others in the name of Jesus.
- As Romans 6:11 urges, starting today you can consider yourself dead to the power and allure of sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus.

For you and me as for Jesus, the rite of baptism was a momentary act at a particular point in your life. Yet as we see in the life of Jesus, baptism also signals the start of something new. Your baptism started something in your life: you started a lifelong commitment to serving God's will by imitating Jesus. Be kind; love abundantly; forgive generously; submit to God humbly. You can even start today.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:49 Good News Translation