

“Water and Spirit”
Epiphany 2010
Luke 3:17-22

Today is Baptism Sunday. No one is going to be baptized today--we have several baptisms coming up, but none today. Rather, we are remembering baptism--the baptism of Christ, and our own baptism.

Do you remember your baptism? Many of you, perhaps most of you, do not literally remember the event--you were baptized as infants. Some though, including me, were older and remember your baptism well. I grew up baptist, and since baptists wait until the person has made a profession of faith to baptize, I was baptized as a young child. It was 1987, I was 7 and a half years old, and I remember climbing up into my father's lap one Sunday morning and saying, "Dad, I want to be baptized." Now, since Dad was the pastor of the church, he was the one to talk to about this. And Dad began to ask me some questions, about my faith, starting with, do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. That's not the kind of question you say no to, so I said I did. And then Dad asked, what does that mean? Now, I was only seven years old, so Dad wasn't looking for a much of an answer. But I remember that my Sunday School teachers had told me that Christ was my Lord and Savior, but I only knew the very basic outlines of what that meant. I knew it meant that Jesus had saved me from my sins--whatever those were; at the time stealing a chocolate chip cookie, lying about it, and using bad words--and that I should do what he wanted me to do.

Well, my answers were apparently satisfactory, because Dad told me that he was proud of me and that if I was ready, I could be baptized. So that Sunday, after the sermon and during the "invitation hymn," Dad invited all who wanted to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior to come down the aisle to make a profession of faith. I think I probably waited until the second verse--I don't really remember--and then I went down, and told my Dad and pastor that I wanted to make a profession of faith. And after the hymn, I did.

My baptism was scheduled for Easter Sunday, 1987. I remember waiting, just on the side of the baptistry, and seeing my father standing down in the middle of the pool, and stretching his arm out to welcome me down. I stepped down into the pool, and then up onto the cinder block what was placed in the pool for little kids like me. The water was maybe chest deep for me. Dad asked me again, in front of everyone, "Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" And I said again, "I do." And Dad replied, "Then upon your profession of faith, I baptize you my brother, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." My brother--that always gets me. My father baptized me his brother.

I remember that after it was all over, I didn't feel like much had changed. In fact, I still did all the stuff that I was doing before--all the sins that I now knew Christ had forgiven me for! Except one thing did change--now I felt bad for all the stuff I did wrong. Because even though it seemed like nothing had changed in my baptism, I knew something really had changed. I just didn't know quite what yet.

In the gospel reading from Luke, we heard and remembered Jesus' baptism. Every year about this time, we remember the baptism of Jesus because his baptism is the model for

our baptism. Christ was baptized to identify with us--and we are baptized to identify with him. When we look closely at his baptism, we begin to understand more about our own baptism.

The story begins with John the Baptist out in the wilderness. John was a mighty good preacher--and he was preaching a tough message. He called them a brood of vipers, we might say snake in the grass. What John meant was that they were hypocrites and thieves. There were some people in John's crowd who took their religion far too lightly--they simply assumed that since Abraham was their spiritual father, they were off the hook--and they lived that way, off the hook; and there were some in the crowd who were outright thieves, extorting money from the people. Yet John's preaching brought them to their knees, and they came begging forgiveness and asking what they could do. So John baptized them to symbolized their cleansing and forgiveness, and told them to look toward the Savior who was coming. For John's water could only symbolize repentance and cleansing, but the Savior would baptize with that which could actually cleanse and forgive: with fire and Spirit.

So John the Baptist was baptizing them in droves, and somewhere along the way Jesus came to be baptized. Luke doesn't tell us anything about the moment when Jesus was baptized; he just says, "and when Jesus also had been baptized." Listen to that phrase again: "when Jesus also had been baptized..." It's almost parenthetical. John doesn't stress the moment, and put a lot of weight on the precise when and where of Jesus' baptism. That's refreshing to me. Because sometimes I think we stress the precise moment, the when and where of baptism. In the history of the church, there have been countless theological battles over the precise moment when baptism should be: infancy, childhood, adulthood. And there are no rock solid answers to those questions. For most of us, it's more personal. Should my child be baptized in the church of his mother or his father--and who would we like to do it? Or it can be even more personal--is this the right moment for me to be baptized--am I ready to take this big step? Some people think that baptism is a destination, that once you're baptized, you've spiritually made it. Or, baptism is like one-time deal, sort of like spiritual vaccination; once you get it, you're finished. The refreshing thing about Jesus' baptism in Luke is that because the baptism itself is so downplayed that the weight of that precise moment is lifted. Baptism isn't about just the moment--baptism, whenever it happens, is about the beginning of a life-long spiritual journey.

Luke's account of Jesus's baptism turns our attention to what this life-long journey entails, it's lasting significance and daily application in our lives. Luke says, "when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened". It's when Jesus is praying that the heavens are opened and the Holy Spirit comes down on him. Now, we know that prayer was a part of Jesus life; he was regularly going off to pray; and he particularly prayed at important junctures in his life. But I want us to look at this prayer symbolically, signaling something beyond communication and conversation with God; this prayer symbolizes a deep personal relationship with God. It symbolizes an ongoing relationship, that for us is started in baptism and continues throughout our entire lives. In a way, the word prayer is a symbol for what we could call a baptism-shaped life.

When it comes down to it, prayer symbolizes the life-long process of surrendering my will to the Father's will. Whenever Jesus prayed, the essence of his prayers were submission to the Father's will. When he taught his disciples how to pray, the prayer begins,

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” When Jesus was praying for his disciples, he said, “For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.” And when he was facing the cross, in the Garden of Gethsemane, when his life was literally on the line, Jesus, “My Father, if it is possible may this cup be taken from me, yet not as I will but as you will.” Then, a little later he prayed, “Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

Surrender of our will to the Father’s will is at the heart of what it means to be a baptized child of God. Somehow I knew this as a child when it came time for me to be baptized. I knew that accepting Jesus as my Lord meant that I needed to do what God wanted me to do. I knew in mind that I was giving control of my life over to God; but knowing that in mind and doing it are two totally different things. In fact, surrendering our will to God’s will is something that we do over and over again, for the rest of our lives. This was the prayer that Jesus made at the beginning of his ministry, and this was the prayer he made at the end.

One way that this act of surrender is repeated over and over again in our lives is in resisting temptation. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went into the wilderness for time along with God and immediately he was tempted. For forty days he ate nothing, and he was starving--and so the devil comes and tempts him to turn stones into bread. Then the devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and says worship me and you’ll have them all. And then to finish it off, the devil says, “Show the world how powerful you are; throw yourself from this temple and let a legion angels catch you before you hit the ground.” In case, Jesus was able to resist the temptation; but he did not do so alone. He resisted by relying on the relationship of his baptism, on his connection with his Father, and by remembering his calling to surrender his desires to his Father’s will.

You and I will be tempted in this life--it comes with being a child of God. We are tempted to do what God does not want us to do; and so we are tempted to not surrender our lives to him, to take back control of our lives. Reflect to yourself: how have you been tempted recently? Temptation comes for me in short and powerful moments. Sometimes it goes like this, with a conversation with myself: “Hmm, I’d like to do that. I can do that. It’s not that big of a deal. Why not?” And sometimes there is no conversation at all: I suddenly find myself about to say something or do something that I know I should not do. As baptized Christians, children of God, our calling is to resist that temptation. It is to turn the conversation around and say, “I can do that, but I should not do that. That is a big deal, because I am a child of God. I will surrender my will to his will and resist temptation.”

Another repeated moment of surrendering our will is in the discipline of trusting. When Jesus gave his will over to God, it was an act of trust every time, of trust that the Father knew more and had more power than he did. And so it is when you and I give our will over to God. It is the constant practice of saying, “I will trust God in this.” “God knows best.” “In God’s good time.” “I don’t why this has happened, but God has a plan.” “God will work in his own way.” Several years ago, when I was interning in a hospital as a chaplain, I went to see an elderly lady in his early 90’s. When I arrived in the room, she was laying there flexing both feet and her toes back and forth and back and forth. I couldn’t figure out what in the world she was doing! She told me she was exercising. And then she told

me why she had requested to see me. She was tired of living--all of her friends had passed, her husband had passed, some of her children had passed, and she could not figure out why God had left her so long on this earth. Yet, there was nothing she could do about it; and so, while laying there doing her toe exercises, she was also stretching her faith--learning to trust. Even at the end of her life, she was learning lesson of submitting to God's will. It's a lesson that begins at our baptism, and continues for the rest of our lives.

There's a famous story that whenever Martin Luther was tempted, or doubted his faith, or was afraid, or was tired, he was saying to himself, "Remember your baptism." Remember your baptism. Of course, he could not remember the moment; he was baptized as an infant. But that's not what he meant anyway. He was remembering the relationship that began in that moment, and what it meant for his life. He was remembering that he was baptized. When I remember my baptism, I think often of that moment when my father immersed me in water. And then I remember that I was immersed in the Spirit as well, and I began a life-long spiritual journey with God, a deep personal relationship that asks me to surrender my will to God's will, to live a baptism-shaped life of trust and obedience.

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