

Where Duty and Destiny Meet

Matthew 3:13-17

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How many of you remember your baptism? The way the water felt running over your head if you were at the font, or covering your body as you were lowered down into the water, the water rushing off our body as you were lifted back up?

We often say the words: "Remember your baptism!" but it might be a hard thing to do if you were baptized as an infant. Not many of us can remember the first 1 or 2 years of our lives.

But, remembering our baptism is an important thing to do all of our lives. In fact, I wish now that I would have marked the baptism dates of my own baptism and my children's, and celebrated that as we do our birthdays. Why? Because it would keep us ever aware that we are a baptized child of God. And what is more important than that?

Today we remember the baptism of our Lord Jesus. John the Baptist was calling people to repent of their sins and come to the waters and be baptized. It was a baptism of repentance and forgiveness.

And, even though there had been years of quiet with God's chosen people – things had been kind of ho hum in the religious world – the Romans occupied Judah and all of Israel, the religious leaders went along with them in many ways so that they could continue having authority over the temple and the people.

But this time with John's preaching was a kind of an awakening of hearts and minds; it was a calling of the people to really come and get right with God. It was a great time for Jesus, now grown, to begin his ministry!

And so he appears. This is Jesus the man; Jesus who had already become known to many people, Matthew says. As he comes into the water, I wonder how that scene really looked, don't you?

Were there other people already in the water, waiting their turn to be baptized by John? Maybe some were lingering there after their

baptism, moved by their experience, maybe praising God with a psalm; perhaps hugging one another with joy and love.

Did the people recognize Jesus – the carpenter from Nazareth whom many had come to know? Or were these strangers to Jesus?

And what was the river like? I read in the Bible Encyclopedia that in ancient days, the river Jordan was quite rapid in many places. There are big drops where the water falls and then moves swiftly. It was more like a stream but it was very problematic for many trying to cross over, especially when it flooded out of its banks. Then it became very dangerous and sometimes impossible to cross.

It would make sense that John would have chosen a place that wasn't running too swiftly, but it's an interesting thing to ponder, I think. Was it difficult walking and standing in the water because of the current?

We will never know. We aren't told any of those details, are we? There are more questions as well ...

Did John know that Jesus was the Messiah? John seems to not just know Jesus (they were cousins, so he surely would have recognized him), but he also seems to know that there is something very special about Jesus – enough so that he wants to decline from baptizing him. He says it should be the other way around.

But Jesus insists that this is God's plan and it is up to them to fulfill that plan.

So John baptizes Jesus and then we read that a dove came down above Jesus' head and a voice from heaven spoke saying "This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

Did John hear this voice too? Did the other people witness it? Was it just Jesus? If that's the case, how do we know about it?

The big question I think many people have asked over the years is whether or not Jesus actually fully understood who he was and what

his work was about until that moment. Did he know he was the Son of God, the Messiah, even as a child growing up?

We do have that account from Luke 2 telling us about the incident when Jesus was 12 and stayed behind after his parents had left. They had been in Jerusalem for Passover with lots of family and friends so Mary and Joseph didn't think anything about the fact that they hadn't seen their boy all day. I guess they thought he was with friends somewhere in the crowd.

But when they realized he was not with them they hurried back and after three days of searching they found him in the temple listening and asking questions of the religious teachers.

When his parents asked why he had done this, his answer was "Don't you know I must be in my Father's House?"

It seems that Luke presents Jesus as knowing who he was at the age of 12.

Well, regardless of what the answer is to any of those questions, Jesus certainly received an affirmation of who he was and that he was loved by God, his heavenly Father.

The dove represented the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus. And God said, "This is my son, my beloved."

And we can see in our minds eye Jesus being enveloped by God's outpouring love and blessing and anointing of the Spirit. We can see Jesus hugging John, maybe giving him words of encouragement, maybe speaking to the people around him.

Or perhaps he is silent, his jaw set, his face determined as he makes his way to the bank ... the place where duty and destiny meet.

And he walks out of the water and straight into the wilderness where he would fast and be tempted, just as we are, for 40 days before calling his disciples and beginning his journey of teaching and healing ... and moving toward the cross.

So why was Jesus baptized? Jesus, who was the only human ever to live who was completely without sin? John's baptism was about repentance and forgiveness. Surely Jesus had no need of that. Yet he went anyway.

But think of these things:

Jesus' baptism established and initiated (kind of like an ordination) the beginning of his ministry.

Jesus' baptism affirmed that he was the Son of God.

And Jesus' baptism brought him very much into the human state with the people. He had no sin to wash but he became immersed in the cleansing waters with those who did. It brought him, once again, just as his birth did, to a humble place – which was what his ministry always reflected.

When we are baptized – whether it be as a child or an adult; whether it be with a pouring of water over the head or an immersion deep into the waters – we are following in Jesus' footsteps. We are being obedient just as he and John were being.

I love baptism! I don't know how many baptisms I've had the honor of performing since I was ordained in 1996. Some years there may have been only one. Some there were many. Most have been infants with their parents, standing with tears in their eyes, making the profession of faith and the promises until the child reaches the age of confirmation.

Some of been adults who have knelt before me as I poured water on their heads. The eyes of the adults are so moving as they look up with pure love for God and expectations of what God is doing in their lives.

Two baptisms were in a lake and they were full immersion baptisms. They were sisters, age 10 and 8 and I never questioned their readiness for baptism! They chose the way and the place and it was a glorious, very rainy, very muddy day that I will never forget.

Besides the actual act of baptism – putting water on the head, I find it so meaningful after baptism to do the sign of the cross. I put my thumb on the forehead of the newly baptized and make the cross and call their name and tell them they are a child of God, grafted into the family of God, sealed in God's grace.

Sealed! I imagine God's thumb making the mark of God's own seal that names and claims us all as his own, saying – "You are my child, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased!"

We don't want to ever forget our baptism; that we are baptized children of God. But I want to talk about one more thing that is important. Let's go back to the river a minute. Imagine that the water we are baptized in symbolizes the River Jordan where Jesus was baptized.

And imagine how rivers flow – always moving – sometimes rather slowly and sometimes so rapidly it might take your breath away. Imagine you in the river for your baptism.

I think we often think of baptism as a sweet act – a tradition, and it is. But it is also a sacrament that Jesus commanded we all do as he gave the great commission saying "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28)

Baptism is meaningful, for sure. But as you come into that symbolic river that moves swiftly along – be ready! Baptism is a call to discipleship, a beginning of a life – the life of a follower of Christ – and that means sacrifice, going where we might not be sure of, doing what we think we can't do, it is living the life of love and compassion and grace, it is sharing the faith, it is serving Christ's church – because we are a beloved child of God.

This morning we have the joy of witnessing 2 Elders who are, as baptized members, are ready to serve as leaders in Christ's church. I would ask Bob and Randy to come up now for installation as active Ruling Elders.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ
have clothed yourselves with Christ.
There is one body and one Spirit,
just as we were called to the one hope of our calling.

In baptism Bob and Randy were clothed with Christ,
and are now called by God through the voice of the church
to service in ministry and governance,
announcing in word and deed the good news of Jesus Christ.

We remember with joy our common calling to serve Christ,
and we celebrate God's particular call to our brother and sisters this
morning.

In Jesus' baptism, duty and destiny meet. Jesus' comes and stands
with sinners. His duty is to be with them, to offer grace and
forgiveness of sins. His destiny is to be the Lamb of God, the Son of
God, the Savior of a world of sinners.

And we, as baptized members of his church, come to the place where
we make commitment, where we promise to fulfil our duty as
disciples and where our destiny is to serve others until the day we are
face to face with our Maker.

Remember Jesus' baptism, knowing he started his ministry standing
among sinners and he ended his ministry dying for sinners.

Remember your baptism, knowing you are a sinner redeemed by this
Savior who gave his all. You are a child of God, forgiven and freed,
sealed in his love, empowered to serve.

Remember your baptism and rejoice and go out in love.

Amen.