

Jesus' Baptism

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Matthew 3:13-17

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

When it comes to baptism, I'm covered both ways.

I was baptized in a Presbyterian Church in Canfield, Ohio, a small town situated in northeast Ohio. I was baptized at age two, along with my older brother and younger sister. The Rev. Harold Kaiser sprinkled water on my head, the most common mode of baptism in the Presbyterian Church, then as now.

My parents enrolled me in Confirmation Class when I was in middle school. The class was designed to help young people like me affirm the Christian vows taken for us in baptism by our parents. We spent two hours with the pastor every Saturday morning for two years learning the Bible and the Presbyterian way. I often stared out the window wishing I could run free outside instead of being confined indoors learning a subject that seemed light years away from my emerging adolescence. You would have thought this class would have ignited a spark of faith in me. It didn't! I remained, for the most part, clueless. The vows never took!

During college, I made a conscious decision to become a follower of Christ. Well-meaning, zealous Baptists convinced me I should be baptized as an adult. What did I know? So I consented to be baptized in the Maranatha Bible Baptist Church by the Rev.

Finkenbiner. I'm not making these names up! They sound as if they belong in Garrison Keiler's Lake Wobegon. I was given a white baptismal robe to wear over my shorts and tee shirt. I remember thinking the baptismal pool resembled a large Jacuzzi. The Rev. Finkenbiner wore waders under his white robe—the kind of waterproof gear worn by fishermen.

Some Christians argue for infant baptism. After all, God loves us before we can ever love in return. Other Christians insist adult baptism is the only way to go, since every explicit reference to baptism in the New Testament involves adults. The way I figure it, I'm covered both ways!

My purpose today is not to make a case for adult or infant baptism. Both infant and adult baptism can be appropriate expressions of faith. Instead, I want us to consider God's redemption in the light of Jesus' baptism.

We've been preaching our way through God's Big Story this year. God's Big Story centers on three words: creation, fall and redemption. We're created to live in relationship with God and each other. Sin, however, severs these relationships. In theological terms, we call it "the fall." Adam and Eve fall out of relationship with God. So God seeks redemption through the covenant

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made with Israel in the Old Testament and Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

The lead article in *Sports Illustrated* this week, titled "The Road to Redemption," chronicles the San Diego Charger's redemption from a string of early season losses. Redemption seeks to recover what has been lost by way of a payment or sacrifice of some kind.

Matthew records that Jesus came from Galilee to the River Jordan, a distance of 70 miles, for the expressed purpose of being baptized (3:13). Jesus doesn't happen to be wandering around the ancient world and bump into John. Jesus deliberately seeks out John for baptism.

John's baptism signals a repentance for sins that opens the way for the coming of the Messiah (3:6). John prophesies about one who is coming who will baptize with Holy Spirit and fire (3:11). Now that greater one had arrived and wants to be baptized.

You can hardly blame John for trying to prevent Jesus from baptism. "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not you" (3:14). Jesus has nothing to repent and nothing to forgive. The tense of the verb "prevented" is imperfect, implying continuing past action. John doesn't try just once to prevent Jesus, he keeps on trying to prevent Jesus from being baptized. "I'm here to be baptized," Jesus announces. "But I can't baptize you," John replies. "You must baptize me," Jesus insists.

"But I can't baptize you," John answers. And so it goes.

Jesus offers an enigmatic response to John in verse 15, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). What does Jesus mean "to fulfill all righteousness"? Today's English Version helps us in this regard, "Let it be so for now. For in this way we shall do all that God requires."

To fulfill all righteousness is to do whatever God requires. Jesus is willing to do whatever it takes to obey God, regardless of how it appears to others on the outside. It doesn't matter to Jesus that the inferior baptizes the superior. Doing God's will is the only thing that matters.

When Jesus submits to John's baptism, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus as a dove (3:16). All three members of the Trinity are well-represented in our story. God the Father speaks. The Holy Spirit descends. Jesus receives.

This descending dove is accompanied by a voice from heaven saying, "This is my son, whom I love; with whom I am well pleased" (3:17). It is unclear from our story whether anyone else overhears this voice. One thing is certain; Jesus hears this voice loud and clear.

God the Father's endorsement of Jesus as the Son of God is immediately challenged by Satan's temptation in the wilderness (4:1-11). Will Jesus prevail when tempted to be God's beloved Son? Come next Sunday and find out!

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Baptism represents a turning point in Jesus' life. It marks a demarcation from his private life to his public ministry. Jesus' willingness to submit to baptism becomes the catalyst to begin his ministry.

Jesus' baptism causes me to ask whether Jesus knows from the outset that he is the Messiah, the anointed Son of God? The apocryphal gospel mentioned last Sunday, The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, assumes Jesus must have known from the womb that he was the anointed Son of God. That's why Thomas tries to fill in the gaps with all kinds of exploits by Jesus the wonder boy.

Does God short-circuit the normal course of human maturation in Jesus' life to reveal his identity or does God reveal Jesus' Messianic consciousness gradually over time? I suspect Jesus becomes aware of his Messianic mission, as it is unfolded to him. He isn't a static being who has it all worked out from the get-go. His awareness of his identity and ministry emerge as he lives his life. Our Scripture lesson from last Sunday illustrated this point. We read that at twelve years of age, "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature; and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). If there was any lack of clarity before his baptism, the descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove and voice from heaven seals it for him.

So what difference does Jesus' baptism have to do with our life? First, Jesus' baptism represents his solidarity with sinners. John tells us in verses 7-10 that God resists

the proud and blesses those who are humble enough to repent of their sins. Jesus' baptism serves as a practical demonstration of Jesus' role as our Immanuel, our "with-us God," as Stan reminded us a few weeks ago. The author of Hebrews writes, "We do not have one who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15-16).

If Jesus is the sinless one, why is he baptized? He isn't baptized for his sins; he is baptized for everybody else's sins. His baptism becomes a type of substitutionary atonement. He substitutes his life for our sins. Paul writes, "God made him who knew no sin to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus' baptism shows his solidarity with us, just as our baptism shows our solidarity with him.

There is a second application of Jesus' baptism to our life. Jesus' baptism becomes our paradigm for discipleship. We aspire to be a disciple-making church. Dallas Willard likens a disciple to an apprentice. An apprentice is simply someone who has decided to be with another person in order to become capable of becoming what that person is or doing what that person does. I spend time with Jesus to learn from him how to live my life as he would live my life if he were I. Notice I'm not learning how to live Jesus' life. His life has already wonderfully been lived. I am learning from Jesus how to live my life.

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Jesus' baptism provides a practical tutorial in Christian discipleship. The superior one is baptized by the inferior one. The greater one submits to the lesser one. Jesus teaches his followers "the last shall go first" (Matthew 19:30). Jesus assumes a lower posture in his baptism.

This lower posture is so countercultural to the world's way of operating. We want the superior position. We want to be number one. We want to be right. We want the seat of honor.

Two disciples, James and John, ask Jesus if they can be seated on Jesus' right and left in glory. Jesus answers, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38).

Jesus pulls the rug out from under their striving for seats of honor. Jesus isn't caught up with who gets first place. Stop talking about who is first and assume the lower position. What would it mean in your marriage or family, among your friendships and work associates to assume a lower position? It would probably shock a lot of people, given our penchant for being number one!

Like many of you, I watched the BCS championship game played between Florida and Oklahoma Thursday night. In the absence of a playoff in Division I college football, at least four teams are clamoring for a piece of the national title—Florida, Utah, Southern Cal and Texas. This annual dispute over number one will inevitably lead to a playoff

one day in Division I college football.

Isn't it interesting how important it is for us to establish who is number one? We rank everything. Chickens aren't the only ones who operate by a pecking order.

Jesus is the ultimate number one, but he is content to assume a lower position. We take our lead from Jesus. Lower is higher in the kingdom of God.

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