



Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany
The Baptism of our Lord
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
January 12, 2020

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A woman goes to the Priest to ask him to bury her dog in the church cemetery. He tells her “I’m sorry, we can’t do that, you’ll have to take him to the pet cemetery.” But the woman pleads “Please, I just need to know I will see him again in heaven, so I need you to bury him in holy ground!” but the priest won’t budge. “I’m sorry, dear lady, I just can’t do that. Only Christians can be buried in holy ground and only humans can be Christian.”

Finally, after much crying from the woman, he suggests “Maybe try one of the non-denominational churches, they sometimes do weird things.” She pulls herself together and as she’s leaving asks “What do you think, Father, if I offer them \$50,000 as a donation for their trouble, would that be appropriate?” And the priest says, “Dear woman, come back, you didn’t mention the dog had been baptized!!”

Baptism is a familiar rite to us and it has a very ancient history. Two thousand years ago, when Jesus was baptized, it was a rite that was practiced by the Jewish people when non-Jewish adults wanted to join the Jewish community and when Jewish people wanted to express repentance and the beginning of a new life dedicated to God.

And that raises a question: why was Jesus baptized? 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. Let’s take each of those ideas in turn.

First of all: 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 priest or bishop 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 priesthood or commissioning to be a Vestry member, are all secondary to our baptism. For example, the root and source of my calling to share the gospel and help others is my baptism – my ordination to the priesthood is only a commissioning to be able to carry out certain specialized tasks within that ministry (such as celebrating the sacraments.) The same is true for each of you. By your baptism you have been ordained to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ” – as our baptismal covenant phrases it.

This points us to the second aspect of what baptism 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 like 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 – the fact that it is an ordination to ministry and the fact that it is an Epiphany of humanity's baptism into God through Christ – help us understand that Christ is being baptized for us. Jesus isn't baptized because he needs it but because we need it. As the hymn we sang at the gospel reading says: “Christ, *when for us* you were baptized, God's Spirit on you came . . .” Jesus is baptized in order 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.