

The Christian New Year didn't begin on January 1. We began our liturgical New Year on the first Sunday of Advent, right after Thanksgiving. Our year begins in preparation for Jesus' birth and Christ's return. After Christmas, we moved to Epiphany and today, before we head into the Common Time of our calendar, we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan. We talked last week about how the gospels didn't agree on the details of Jesus birth and early life, but they all agree that Jesus was baptized by John and they agree that his baptism inaugurated the beginning of his public ministry.

So, this morning, we'll consider Jesus' baptism and we'll consider our own.

John the baptizer was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. And Mark tells us that *everyone* came. Which seems sort of odd to me. I imagine you could draw everyone to the opening of a nightclub if George Clooney were going to be there. But I have a hard time imagining everyone coming to repent of their sins. But, there they were. And John had told the crowd, "I'm only baptizing you with water. Someone more powerful is coming after me and he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

But then that someone more powerful shows up, not to baptize, but to be baptized. And there is nothing in the text to suggest that he went to the First Class check in line either. It appears that Jesus showed up in the midst of

everyone else from Judea. And after standing in the long line, he was baptized by John.

But his baptism was different from the rest, we presume. Because after his baptism, the heavens were shredded apart and the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dive bombing pigeon.

And the voice. A voice from heaven says, “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Yet another one of those moments I wish I had been there to see for myself.

What did everyone else hear when the voice spoke? And did it scare the dickens out of them?

Some how, some way, the separation between earth and heaven collapses at the baptism of Jesus. Much like the first creation account in Genesis 1.

In the beginning, God.

The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. Then God spoke. “Let there be light.” And there was light.

God speaks and things change.

God speaks creation in Genesis as the Spirit of God moves across the waters.

And then, as Jesus comes out of the waters of baptism, God’s spirit again

moves across the waters, as God speaks words of blessing. “You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased.”

One very radical notion we hold as Christians is that in baptism we are joined with Christ in his baptism. But how many of you (no need to raise your hands) hear those words, “You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased” and believe them?

Because you should.

But it is my experience, in the way we treat each other and in the way we treat ourselves, that we don't. We have a hard time internalizing this message from God.

So, take a moment and think about God saying those words to you. **You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased.**

pause

That may not have been enough time for you to really take it in, but come back to it this week. When you catch yourself in self destructive acts, hear those words. When you doubt your giftedness, hear those words. When you catch yourself believing that you deserve to be abused, or forgotten, or second best, hear those words.

Because the implications are big. When we don't believe that we are God's beloved, we engage in self destructive behaviors. We treat ourselves as less than. Of course, we also have problems if we believe that we are God's ONLY beloved. What would be the possibilities if we treated ourselves and treated everyone else as if our baptismal promises were true?

Baptisms often seem to be cute and innocent events. Sweet babies in their grandmother's gown, adoring family all around. And that can be a part of baptism. But baptisms are not tame events. At baptisms, God breaks into our world, shredding the barrier between heaven and earth. We come up out of the water as new people, reborn and claimed as Christ's own for the world.

Baptism is one of two sacraments in the Presbyterian Church. The other one is Communion. The word "sacrament" is the Latin translation of the Greek Word "mysterion", from which we get our word "mystery". Mysterion refers to God's direct action in space and time, which is baffling to human experience and understanding. Augustine, a 5th century church father from Northern Africa, described sacraments well when he called them, "visible signs of an invisible grace." So, when you see a baptism or take communion, you might consider how the things you see, touch, and experience in those sacraments

stand in for greater mysteries that are not visible. Love. Grace. Redemption.

Adoption. Inclusion. Mercy.

The Catholic Church has seven sacraments. During the 1600's the Protestant traditions narrowed sacramental understanding down to the two sacraments we have today in our church. They did this because those were the two sacraments that Jesus participated in and called his followers to participate in as well.

We have inherited a tradition that claims that while something real and important takes place in the sacraments, it isn't the sacraments themselves that we should be worshipping. Rather than getting hung up in where this particular water came from, or some other details of the mystery, we believe that the sacraments point to the mystery of God. It is God who chooses to reveal Godself to us through these experiences.

This water is not magical. It came from the tap in the communion prep room, right next to my office. But "the water that is used symbolizes three accounts from the Bible's Old Testament: the waters of creation, the flood described in the story of Noah, and the Hebrews' escape from slavery in Egypt by crossing the Red Sea. All three stories link humanity to God's goodness through water.

Baptism signifies:

- * the faithfulness of God,
- * the washing away of sin,

- * dying to this life and being reborn into New Life in Christ,
- * putting on the fresh garment of Christ,
- * being sealed by God's Spirit,
- * adoption into the covenant family of the Church,
- * resurrection and illumination in Christ.”¹

It is said that Martin Luther found great comfort in remembering his baptism. In times of despair, he would tell himself, “I am baptized.” This act of remembering your baptism can be powerful if it connects you back to the faithfulness and grace of God. Remembering your baptism doesn’t necessarily mean remembering the moment you were baptized. Many of us were baptized as infants and cannot call to mind that day. But the word remember has an additional meaning. At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples, “do this in remembrance of me”. When we say those words during communion, we don’t just mean “remember that day 2000 years ago when we had dinner with Jesus”. The word has a more active meaning, where remembering means ***making present through enactment***. Remembrance is taking that event from the past and making it real again today in the present.

¹ <http://www.pcusa.org/101/101-infant.htm>

In the French Refomed Church, during an infant baptism, the Minister holds the child and speaks to the child. “For you, little one, Christ came. For you little one, Christ died. You know nothing of this, but we will continue to teach it to you until you confess it yourself”.

That is “remembering our baptisms”. When we baptize infants, and when we renew our own baptismal vows, we call to mind all of the promises made at baptism, so that they will become real for us. So that our children will grow up to confess it for themselves. So that the mystery of God’s interaction in the world will be visible to us in ways we can touch, feel, and see.

This week, I invite you to take home your baptismal stone and remember your baptism. To consider that you are God’s beloved child in whom God is pleased. For you, Christ came. For you, Christ died. We will continue to teach it to you until you can confess it yourself. Amen.