

The Baptism of Jesus

Do you remember your baptism? If you are like the majority of United Methodists who were baptized as infants, you probably remember nothing of your baptism other than what your parents or family have told you. Even if you were a bit older when you were baptized, say 4 or 5 years old, the memories have probably faded. And of course, if you have never been baptized, you won't have any memory of it at all.

I don't remember anything about my baptism. It was in January of 1955, in a Methodist Church, somewhere in Montgomery, Alabama. Back then, it was still called "The Methodist Church". I was about a month old, and of course don't remember the actual ceremony. We moved away from Alabama shortly after that, and I haven't been back, so I have no memory of the city at all. I have seen a black and white picture someone took of the event, with my parents - looking younger than I ever remember them looking - dressed in their Sunday clothes, holding a baby - me - dressed in white.

I sometimes wonder about my baptism - what the minister said - what my parents said - who was there to witness it. But there is no written record of what happened.

We *do* have a record of the baptism of Jesus. In today's scripture from Matthew, we read of how Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Listen again to the verses:

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased."

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

Baptism is a powerful symbol, with powerful meanings, and it has a powerful hold on Christians. It has a powerful hold on our culture also. You see

baptismal imagery in many forms in our popular culture - even when there is no overt connection to Jesus or to Christianity. Baptism is a part of the mental furniture of our culture. While I was preparing this sermon, I thought of three examples of baptismal imagery from popular movies that I have watched in the last few months.

In the second of the original three Star Wars movies, "The Empire Strikes Back", the story opens on an snow-covered planet. Luke Skywalker, the protagonist, is patrolling the area riding on some strange alien animal, when he is attacked by another strange alien animal. When he is finally able to escape on foot, he is hopelessly lost and all alone as the sun sets and the cold intensifies. His friend, Han Solo, who has also been patrolling the ice world, sets off to rescue him. He finds Luke - frostbitten and near death - and they spend the night in an improvised shelter. They are rescued the next morning by others and Luke is taken to a physician for treatment. We see Luke suspended in a large tank of liquid. After several seconds floating there unconscious, he is removed from the tank revived and healed of his injuries.

In the second movie, "Austin Powers", Austin - played by comedian Mike Myers - was frozen back in the 1960's. I am not sure why. Anyway, the British Secret Service decides to thaw Austin out to confront his arch enemy, Doctor Evil. As Austin is reanimated, he is dipped into a large vat filled with pink goo. He emerges from the goo awake and after several funny scenes is ready to go to work fighting against Doctor Evil.

The third movie, "The Matrix", is a bit harder for me to figure out. The main character, Neo, played in the movie by Keanu Reeves, gradually through the course of the film, becomes aware that he and most of the rest of humanity are controlled by a computer intelligence called The Matrix, that has enslaved people for its benefit. The Matrix has the people connected to it, with their bodies floating in - you guessed it - tanks of liquid. Neo is somehow able to disconnect himself from the Matrix and is flushed out of his tank to go on and fight against The Matrix.

None of these three movies has any obvious connection with Christianity, but the baptismal imagery is obvious nonetheless. In "The Empire Strikes Back", the water heals Luke Skywalker, and he emerges renewed. In

“Austin Powers”, Austin is brought back to life - to enter a life of service. And in “The Matrix”, Neo’s experience serves as a means of beginning a new life and transcending the evil around him. They are all three powerful symbols of the power of baptism.

Likewise, when John baptized Jesus in the river Jordan, three symbolic things happened:

First - The heavens opened. That tells us that those who belong to God do not live separated from God, and that heaven is open to us, and we are able to commune with God.

Second - The visible symbol of the Holy Spirit came from heaven and rested upon Jesus. That tells us that those who belong to God have a purpose, and that the Holy Spirit of God comes to empower us to serve God.

Third - God acknowledged his relationship with Jesus. “*This is my beloved Son, I love him, and I am pleased with him.*” That tells us that God loves you, God is pleased with you, and God has no trouble claiming you.

Those symbols and ideas are what the baptism of Jesus was all about.

As Matthew tells the story, Jesus didn’t get baptized without an argument. When he appeared at the Jordan River, John the Baptist said, “What are you doing here?”

It was a silly question; Jesus came to be baptized. And John said, “Sorry, but you’ve got it backwards. You should be baptizing me, not me baptizing you.” But Jesus insisted. “We must do this,” Jesus says, “because it will fulfill all righteousness.”

According to Matthew, Jesus was baptized to announce a new kind of righteousness. It began with Joseph, the husband of Mary, the father of Jesus. Joseph was a righteous man, says Matthew, and planned to quietly dismiss Mary when he learned she was pregnant. Then an angel appeared in a dream, calling Joseph to keep Mary and to take the child as his own. If Joseph had stuck by Old-Testament law, he would have dismissed Mary. But Joseph trusted the living voice of God rather than legalistic rules.

Joseph was righteous.

In today's Old Testament scripture reading from the forty-second chapter of Isaiah, Isaiah also speaks of a chosen servant of God who will bring forth righteousness to the nations.

⁶I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,

⁷to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

In the gospel of Matthew, the subject of righteousness comes up several times. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is righteous," - who live with a desire to do the will of God. He also said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness," - who suffer because they do what God wants them to. He said, "Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness," and "the righteous shall enter eternal life," and "the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom." Jesus came into the world and was baptized to show us the way of God's new righteousness.

By the way, the word "righteousness" as used in the Bible doesn't mean what you might think it does. The word "righteousness" has come to be associated with the term "self-righteousness" and has taken on a negative connotation. Righteousness as used in the Bible doesn't mean prudish morality, a blind conformity, or a "holier-than-thou" attitude towards others.

Righteousness means to be in a right relationship with God. The Apostle Paul says that none of us is "righteous," - not saying that none of us has ever done anything right, but rather saying that our life with God and with God's children is out of kilter, and needs to be set right. Jesus has become our righteousness, says Paul. Jesus has done for us that which we cannot do for ourselves - put things right between us and God. When John Wesley talked about being righteous, about being set right with God, he used the

term “justifying grace”.

Righteousness means to live life in harmony with God, to see our lives, not as our own, to use as we please, but rather as God’s gifts, to be used as God pleases. When we do right, when we hold one another to account, when we urge one another to be all that God intends for us to be, and allow others to demand the best of us, we are fulfilling the righteousness made possible in Jesus Christ.

When asked to share her beauty tips, the actress Audrey Hepburn shared the following:

For attractive lips, speak words of kindness.

For lovely eyes, seek out the good in people.

For a slim figure, share your food with the hungry.

For beautiful hair, let a child run his or her fingers through it once a day.

For poise, walk with the knowledge that you never walk alone.

People, even more than things, have to be restored, renewed, revived, reclaimed, and redeemed; never throw anyone out.

Remember, if you ever need a helping hand, you will find one at the end of each of your arms.

As you grow older, you will discover that you have two hands; one for helping yourself, and the other for helping others.

Her beauty tips are a good recipe for righteous living as well.

We can confess our sin in church, because in Jesus Christ, our sin is forgiven. We can be honest about our shortcomings because Jesus has put us in a relationship to God that can’t be undone, even by our sin. We need to be regularly reminded of what a gift it is to be loved by a God who is righteous and has, in Jesus Christ, made the means for us to be righteous as well.

Baptism may be the clearest moment when God's claim on human life is announced. But it takes time to see if we're going to live as if we belong to God. We cannot know each challenge or demand on us in advance. We can only live one day at a time as faithfully as we're able, trusting that God is even more faithful than we are.

We act as if we are God's beloved sons and daughters. And we grow into the promises of God, and keep growing up until we can claim those promises for ourselves. That's what it means to be righteous. That's what it means to be baptized.

Amen.

Offertory Prayer

Almighty God, giver of every good and perfect gift,
teach us to render to you all that we have and all that we are,
that we may praise you not with our lips only, but with our whole lives,
turning the duties, the sorrows, and the joys of all our days into a living
sacrifice to you,
through our savior Jesus Christ.

Amen

Benediction

Go forth in joy and open your soul to the living word of God!
You've been given the power to live as children of God
Go now to dedicate yourselves to the One we love and to serve God
gloriously.

Amen.