

# A REMEMBRANCE OF BAPTISM

## Matthew 13-17

### BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

**January 12, 2020**

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On this Baptism of Our Lord Sunday, which occurs annually on our Church's liturgical calendar the first Sunday after Epiphany, we remember Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, and the revelation that He is the Son of God. In our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we practice infant baptism, so our worship gurus suggest that the Baptism of Our Lord is a great day to celebrate a baptism. I concur. We have been able to do so on a few occasions during my ministry with you. If there are no baptisms planned for this day, pastors are encouraged by the Sundays And Seasons, a resource book for Lutheran worship, to include a thanksgiving for baptism in this service. And, we did.

One suggestion for this service is to invite people to come to the font for a time of personal remembrance of their baptisms. I don't know about you, but since I was baptized before I could speak, I have no personal memories or remembrance of my baptism. I did not learn about my baptism until my adolescent years, when I shared with my parents, Howard and Beatrice Rickards, my desire to attend confirmation class with some of my friends and become a Lutheran. It was then I learned I was baptized a Methodist at Siloam Methodist Church, at the corner of 70<sup>th</sup> and Woodland in West Philadelphia by a minister who ironically bore the name of one of my Lutheran friends, John Kulp. John worshiped with us when he was on vacation in Ocean City. I later learned that Rev. John C. Kulp served for many years at the Ocean City Tabernacle. So, it was more out of sentimentality, rather than theological reasons, that my father declined my request, suggesting that I wait a

few years before making my decision. In deference to my father, I did. I later attended confirmation class as a high school senior in the midst of eighth grade classmates. It was sometime toward the end of this experience that the pastor of St. Matthew, William Elbert, suggested that I become a Lutheran pastor.

Dr. Karoline Lewis, who teaches Homiletics (or preaching) at Luther Seminary, writes a weekly blog titled *“Dear Working Preacher.”* She calls for homiletical restraint when preaching on the baptism of Jesus. She writes:

**“Our denominational desires tend to lean toward sermons that try either to compare our baptisms to that of Jesus’ baptism, assuring equal footing, or conform Jesus’ baptism to our doctrinal beliefs.”**

Then she cautions:

**“Either way has the potential to result in rather bland or boring sermons.**

Dr. Lewis’ advice is well taken, since I can’t recall my personal baptism for comparison, and use a Methodist baptism to conform to Lutheran doctrinal beliefs.

So, this morning, let me direct this message to the subject of today’s worship theme — the Baptism of Our Lord — and what baptism means for Christians, whether of Methodist or Lutheran background. In the Gospel of Matthew, from the outset (1:1), Jesus is presented as the Messiah, the anointed one. He, not Herod, is the true king of Israel. His royal pedigree as the son of David establishes His claim to the Messianic title. Throughout Matthew’s first two chapters, the infancy narrative, the special character of Jesus’ birth, and the events of His early life, the visit of the wise men and Herod’s plot to kill Him, further reinforce His royal identity. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and recapitulates Israel’s history by sojourning to Egypt. However, it is His baptism that finally realizes Jesus’ own identity and purpose. It serves for Matthew as the coronation of Jesus as the true king, the Messiah and Son of God.

Our passage for this day marks both the ending of the story of John the Baptist, and the return to the story of Jesus, the Messiah. Here comes Jesus, as John the

Baptist prophesied the coming of the most powerful one (3:11-12). Jesus must go through two rites of passage, baptism (3:13-17), and testing (4:1-11) before He begins His earthly mission. The fact that Jesus received John's baptism of repentance has been a puzzle, or even an embarrassment to Christians throughout the history of Christianity. How can Jesus receive baptism from His inferior, who is even lower than a servant in relationship to Him? Moreover, if Jesus is not only human, but divine, why does He need a baptism for repentance? For Matthew, however, Jesus' baptism is not only far from being an embarrassment, it is a key to understanding Jesus' true Sonship with God, as well as true discipleship.

In this scene of public baptism, Matthew artistically connects Jesus' identity and discipleship through the heavenly voice as the public revelation of Jesus as God's true Son. The people who are there to be baptized by John know from this revelation that their relationship to God should be marked by humble obedience to God's will, as Jesus, Himself, just demonstrated. In the subsequent chapters of Matthew's Gospel, the disciples will learn this over and over again through Jesus' teaching and exemplary life. As Jesus and John the Baptist must fulfill all righteousness, discipleship, too, demands a life of doing God's will thoroughly.

In my pastoral experience, I have had the privilege of baptizing numerous persons, mostly children, around the baptismal font. I have also baptized infants in a hospital neonatal unit, on the beach in Ocean City, and in the Northfield livingroom of a man during the last days of his life. Since water is the physical element of baptism, I have used city tap water, bottled water, ocean water, and even water taken from the Jordan River. I have served in ministry long enough to baptize the children of children I once baptized. As a father, I have baptized our two older children, and as a grandfather, all of our son's three children, Harper, Graham, and Beau. All of these baptisms have been part of the sacramental life of the Church, and are sacred to me and my memories of ministry.

Fortunately, young families still regard baptism as a special event for their child. They nervously stand around the baptismal font, holding their child dressed either in

an elaborate baptismal garment handed down in the family, or in a special dress or suit never to be worn again by that child. While the day is more a big deal for the parents and grandparents, with a big family gathering reserved in a local restaurant to be enjoyed after suffering through a church service, their emphasis on baptism seems to end there. Few parents I know remind their children of their baptisms, or celebrate the anniversary of their baptisms with anything similar to the attention we lavish on birthdays.

Further, my pastoral experience is that folks outside of deeply active church families have next to no sense of what baptism means, and why it matters. Countless are the times I have baptized the child of one or both parents who don't know the church service well. I have gotten the sense that they are going along with a quaint family tradition for the sake of a spouse, parent, or grandparent. They have little appreciation for what is going on. For this reason, I have spent time visiting with such families and providing them with some preliminary baptismal instruction. There are times when I recite the parents' covenant of baptism **“to bring them to the Word of God and the Holy Supper . . . to teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments . . . to place in their hands the Holy Scripture . . .”** knowing they will never attempt to live up to it.

As a Lutheran pastor, I have made the significance of baptism a priority. Martin Luther daily reminded himself of his baptism. Weekly, we Lutherans remind ourselves of our baptisms as we worship. The Confession of Sin is a time to remember baptism as a forgiveness of sin. Holy Communion is an extension of the baptismal promise. The dismissal is a time to send us forth to live out our baptism in our various roles and vocations in the world. Last and not least of all, we are reminded of our baptisms in the funeral liturgy, in which believers have been joined with Christ.

**“For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.” (ELW p. 280).**

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Jesus will commission and command His gathered disciples to ***“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .”*** (28:19).

The meaning of baptism is to also make disciples. At the end of each baptismal service, the baptized is given a baptismal candle in order to remember the occasion of their baptism by lighting it, and remembering these words from Jesus' Sermon On The Mount: ***“let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”*** (5:16). How are you living out your baptism as a disciple of Jesus?

Baptism is not only an invitation rite or entrance into Christ's community, the Church, it is also the beginning of a lifelong spiritual journey of following Christ in order to become like Christ. In baptism, God also declares us to be God's beloved sons and daughters. That's why I always close my sermons, addressing you as “Beloved people of God,” to remind you who you are and whose you are. Through baptism, we are created for worship, fellowship and discipleship. We Lutherans, and especially those of Grace Lutheran Church, live out their baptisms in worship. However, we are not as strong in our fellowship and discipleship. How can we become a more effective and effusive community in Christ, when we don't participate in fellowship activities, and do not engage ourselves in study and service together in service? How can we better know and love each other, when we race to our cars after worship? How can we grow more in faith and service, when we never involve ourselves in learning and service ministries?

Beloved people of God, God declares His love for and acceptance of us in baptism. God desires to do wonderful things for us and through us. The Spirit which descended upon Jesus at His baptism was present in our baptism, empowering us for ministry in Christ's service. Let us not only remember our baptisms, let us also realize them, starting today.

AMEN