

Meaning Of Baptism

Mark 1:4-11

January 8, 2012

I.

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In addition to Jesus' baptism this voice appeared in the Old and New Testaments on several other occasions (Gen 21:17, 1 Sam. 3:4, Dan. 4:31, Acts 11:9, 2 Pe. 1:18, Rev. 10:4). The Bible has many examples of God appearing in people's lives whether they were ready or not.

What if a voice like that boomed from heaven today? Would we pay attention? Probably so. Although we also might suspect that someone had rigged up a sound system to simulate what might be God's voice; perhaps something like the Wizard of Oz.

But apart from that, if people did think they heard the voice of God from above, I imagine they would listen up. And if that voice gave instructions, I also imagine they would follow those instructions. Something would be very important to cause God to speak in that way.

And Jesus' baptism was that type of event in today's reading. Just as Jesus' birth ushered in the kingdom of God, which still is unfolding, his baptism was the dawn of the Messianic age, which also is yet to be completed. At baptism, Jesus began his earthly ministry.

II.

With that introduction, I would ask you all to sit back and relax. On many occasions I have given sermons that called us to do things to strengthen and deepen our relationship with God. I have spoken of coming to church, prayer, reading the Bible, and fellowship with other Christians.

Today, however, we will simply think about what God has done for us and what it means. And so today's sermon will not challenge us to go out and do something, or call us to further action. Instead, I hope we can reflect on the blessings we have as part God's plans for us.

Two stories in the Bible completely link us with God. The first tells of our creation in God's image on the sixth day (Ge. 1:26, 31). And there are several ideas about what "God's image" means.

Some say God looks sort of like us. You have seen classical art depicting a fearsome old man in the clouds. Others say God's image does not refer to physical resemblance, but rather something more intangible. God's image could be the common gift of God's life giving spirit that we all have while we are alive, or it could be the unique gift of our eternal souls that live on after death.

But whatever we think it means, the mark of God's creation is part of us, and it is a sacred thing. He knew us while we still were in the womb (Ps. 139:13, Jer. 1:5). That's the first way we are linked to God. We are created in his image, and while we might not know exactly what that means, it is a wonderful and comforting thought.

The other way in which we are forever connected to God is through the baptism of Jesus. His baptism made our own baptisms holy. Our baptisms flow from his, and they link us to his death and resurrection so that we might have new life in him in this world and the next.

III.

And in order to understand that, we first might address what seems to be a contradiction. Why did Jesus have to be baptized? He was the Son of God, and was without sin. What could baptism add? Wouldn't his teachings, miracles, and death and resurrection speak for themselves?

John the Baptist probably wondered the same thing. It's likely he thought Jesus had it all backwards. Jesus should be baptizing John rather than the other way around. John should be the baptizee instead of the baptizer.

But God had his reasons. From Jesus' perspective his baptism announced the beginning of his ministry. It represented his anointing by God for the difficult and holy work he would do in the world. And in baptism the Holy Spirit came upon him to strengthen him for that work.

But it didn't end there. Jesus' baptism also was prophetic for us in three ways. First, even though he was free from sin, his baptism linked him in solidarity with our sins and all of the human imperfections and weaknesses that lead us to depart from God's will. His baptism established that our baptisms could cleanse and restore us, and help us be more like him.

Second, Jesus' baptism also sanctified our own baptisms and infused them with a holy character for all time. It established the foundation for the sacrament of baptism in the church today.

Finally, Jesus' baptism made our baptisms transformative. And by this I mean that when we are baptized something inwardly transcendental actually happens. It's more than just words and gestures as we stand around the font. We enter into a new state of spiritual life in which we belong to God, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

IV.

Many of us, however, probably cannot even recall our baptisms. We might have been baptized as infants or young children, and have no memory of that essential first step. And others of us who were baptized later in life still might not think of it as a life-changing event.

After all, we're here in church, aren't we? We've pretty much done what our baptisms called us to do, haven't we? Producing good fruit now is what's important, isn't it? So why focus on the seed that was planted long ago?

Well, I would suggest that our spiritual lives can be enriched by a deeper understanding of what really happened to us when we went to the font, or the pool, or the river, and through that holy sacrament became members of the Body of Christ.

And we might turn to today's second reading from the Book of Acts. We recall that Paul came to Ephesus, and asked some disciples if they had received the Holy Spirit. They said they had not even heard of the Holy Spirit, and had been baptized only with John's baptism of repentance.

Well, Paul fixed that right away. He baptized them in Jesus' name, and the Holy Spirit came upon them. That's what happens now when we are baptized in the name of the Trinity. Today's Gospel tells us that we are baptized with water and the Holy Spirit, and the Prayer Book confirms that the Holy Spirit is sealed within us and we are marked as Christ's own forever (BCP 308).

And let's also look at pages 302 and 303 of the Prayer Book for something else. At baptism we make, or others make for us, three renunciations and three affirmations, which I will summarize.

We renounce Satan and all wicked spiritual forces. We renounce evil powers in the world. And we renounce all sinful desires that draw us from God's love.

Then we affirm Jesus Christ and accept him as our savior. We put our trust in his grace and love. And we promise to follow and obey him as our Lord.

And in these renunciations and affirmations we are pardoned and sanctified through Christ as we enter a new life according to the leading of the Holy Spirit. It would seem we are all set to go through life as God's faithful and obedient servants.

But are we, really? If through baptism we renounce evil and turn to our Lord, and the Holy Spirit is within us, why then after being baptized do we still sin? And is there any help for that?

The answer is the world is broken and we continue to live in it. The power of sin is strong and no one is exempt. In some way or another we all will slip up. But if we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior we can be forgiven. Not only does the Bible say so, but over two hundred years ago the Episcopal Church also made this truth explicit.

In 1801 the General Convention adopted the English Articles of Religion. Article 16, at page 870 of the Prayer Book, states in part, "After we receive the Holy Ghost, we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, and by the grace of God we may rise again and amend our lives."

And through baptism Christ has given us the means of grace to do that; to rise again and amend our lives. That's because through baptism we gain access to the other sacraments of the church, and specifically the Eucharist, through which the forgiveness we received in baptism is restored.

Now that does not mean we come to church on Sunday to take Communion and get cleaned up for the week so we can go back to our old ways until the following Sunday. We have to be sincere in our confession before we come to the rail. That's why we have a period of silence to call up our own individual transgressions before we recite together our common confession.

But it all began with our baptisms, which were made possible by Jesus' baptism, and through which we are eternally linked to our Lord. Paul testified to this in Romans when he said, "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (6:4).

V.

So, baptism is at the core of our faith. Even though we might not recall how it happened, it is important that we appreciate what it means. And if we ask the Holy Spirit to lead us, we will have the assurance and peace that comes with our faith. We cannot lose our way.

And if the Holy Spirit goes before us, the words of our own Baptismal Covenant, which might have been spoken for us even before we knew how to speak, can become realities. I pray those words are never far from us, and I would like to read them now, as I have every year at this time. Here again are the promises of our baptisms by which we are bound to the Lord. They are:

- To continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer.
- To persevere in resisting evil, and, when we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord.
- To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.
- To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- To strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every person.

Powerful words. They express strong promises. They confirm that we are members of the Body of Christ. And they are the way to a holy life. *Amen.*