

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Psalms 29

Acts 8: 14-17

St. Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Baptism of the Lord 2022

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“When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form.” St. Luke 2: 21b-22a

Today we are invited to learn more about the baptism of Jesus. Let's learn a little more about how God the Holy Spirit is at work in Jesus Christ himself; and then let's consider more about how God the Holy Spirit is at work in us...

We actually don't know very much for sure about what Jesus of Nazareth did as a young man, before he was about 30 years old. We know that his father Joseph was a carpenter, and Jesus himself very likely learned that trade; and we know that Jesus lived in the northern town of Nazareth. Joseph evidently died when Jesus was in his teens or 20s, although Blessed Mary, Jesus' mother, outlived the Lord Jesus himself... We know that Jesus' family was a devout household, living under God's Law even while Romans had occupied the Palestinian territory about 50 to 60 years before Jesus' birth...

We also don't know what exactly drew Jesus to visit his cousin John the Baptist. John was ministering at the Jordan River, which flows south from the large lake commonly called the Sea of Galilee... John preached both to Jews and to Gentiles, foreigners, telling them to repent – to be ready for the Messiah... John would baptize people – they would go down into the river and then come up again as a sign of cleansing and renewal...

“Baptism” comes from a Greek word which was originally used if a ship were sunk. As a ship sinks into the water, water flows over it and through it. In the same way, the image of John's baptism of repentance was that this new life is to flood every corner of our hearts as we give ourselves to God in a new way...

Jesus wants to be baptized too. His cousin John doesn't want to baptize Jesus – because he doesn't have anything to repent of! But Jesus insists, and so John goes along with it... Trying to describe the events afterwards, Matthew, Mark and Luke record that the Holy Spirit comes upon the Lord Jesus in a very dramatic way. The whole Trinity is involved, as on-lookers hear the voice of Jesus' heavenly Father speak his approval...

Clearly his baptism is a life-changing event for Jesus the Messiah: After a terrible time of temptation and struggle, Jesus Christ begins his ministry of preaching, healing, and establishing God's kingdom. The climax of the Lord Jesus' ministry is his crucifixion – and then the resurrection follows...

So we note that the practice of baptism took place *before* the ministry of Jesus Christ. But the Holy Spirit began to work in a new way at the time of Jesus' baptism. The early Christians recognized that Christian baptism was different from John's baptism, because the Holy Spirit is involved when someone is baptized a Christian...

In today's second reading, we learn that some Christians in Samaria are a bit confused about baptism, so Peter and John are sent to the congregation to explain Christian baptism better, and to pray for them. Luke records,

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.  
(Acts 8: 14-17)

So, Christian baptism is more than John the Baptist's baptism of repentance – the Holy Spirit is at work in the candidate, for a new beginning...

Well, it all seems pretty clear in the New Testament: The Holy Spirit is at work in Christian baptism... But in the Church today, there is sometimes some confusion about this: What if someone commits their lives to Jesus Christ by faith but aren't baptized? Do they belong to Christ?... What happens if a baby is baptized, but there is no evidence of a life of faith? Is the sacrament of baptism alone to be regarded as a kind of sure ticket to eternal life?... So, now we're moving from the baptism of Jesus to *our* baptisms. How is God the Holy Spirit at work today?...

To answer these questions, I suggest we need to take a really quick overview of the practice of Christian baptism, from the apostles up to today...

In the early Christian Church, adults were baptized after a long time of teaching and preparation. This is called *catechesis*, or basic Christian instruction. Candidates were typically baptized (often secretly during times of persecution), during high festivals like Easter Eve... In the patristic world, if the head of the household became a Christian, all the household members went along with it, including children and slaves. So, children of faith-filled parents were baptized along with their parents and other family members...

We owe a large debt to Augustine, a teacher and bishop of the Church who died in 430. Along with a lot of other stuff, Augustine thought a lot about baptism. Augustine was really clear about our universal need for God to deal with this problem of sin, and Augustine also saw very clearly that it is *God* who takes the initiative to save us – not ourselves. So, Augustine encouraged the baptism of infants, because then God is at work right away, and who knows how long our lives may last?...

Augustine presumed that infant baptism was within the family of Christian believers. While adult baptisms continued throughout the centuries, baptism of babies and young children became normative...

At the time of the western Reformation, there were some Anabaptist Christians who questioned all kinds of Medieval practices. Commitment to Christ is a matter of the heart, they said, not by external rites or practices. So a small minority of Christians were insisting that baptism take place by adults, who could clearly articulate their faith in Jesus Christ for themselves...

More recently – that is, within the past couple of hundred years – the centrality of the Christian faith for very many families in the West has become largely unanchored. The rites of baptism continued to be offered, but the fruits of baptism – lively faith, ministry in the parish communities, and speaking confidently about one’s faith in Christ – doesn’t have the same roots it once did.

This modern trend has gotten Christians to reflect a little more carefully about Christian baptism: For example, we might ask, Where has been the breakdown in ancient *catechesis* – fundamental Christian teaching – so that baptism is sometimes seen now as a family affair, separate from parish life?... How is the Holy Spirit at work among us at the start of our Christian lives today?...

In typical Anglican fashion, let’s outline two extreme positions, and then take the best from both to find a spot in the middle...

On one end of the spectrum, some people might say, “Clearly, Christianity is fundamentally a commitment of the heart, not outward actions. As Romans 5: 1 reads, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Also, St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “For we walk by faith, not by sight.” (II Corinthians 5: 7) What is most important is the inside, not the rites we can see...

In reply to these folks, we might say, “Certainly, Christian commitment is an inner commitment of the will. But we also live this out in practice. Jesus Christ himself commanded us to baptize as a sacrament (Matthew 28: 19), and it’s clear that the Church has understood baptism to be the start of our Christian walk from the beginning. Besides, can’t we agree that it’s God’s initiative to bring us to himself (John 15: 16)?...” So, surely we have to uphold baptism at the start of the Christian life, and can agree that the Holy Spirit is involved...

At the other end of the spectrum, there are some for whom it’s very simple: “God will look after it all. Baptism is part of the process of our responding to God. So we should simply baptize everyone we possibly can...”

This point of view had more weight when just about the entire culture was Christian, and it still is the primary view in the national Orthodox churches such as in Greece or, say, Albania...

To take this position to its logical conclusion, does that mean that the thief on the cross next to Jesus would not enter Paradise? Does that mean that we don't need to be concerned about people's faith commitment at all? How can we reconcile that with the very words of the Lord Jesus?...

I propose a perspective which borrows from both, which is consistent with the New Testament and the Catholic Church – that is, the universal Church... We can agree about that baptism is the norm for Christian initiation, and that God initiates this movement – drawing us to himself... We can also uphold the central importance of Christian commitment and faith, and on-going life within the Church. We can agree that God the Holy Spirit is active and involved, all the times when we are moving from our old sinful lives into the loving arms of the Lord Jesus... Let's uphold the inward faith and the sacrament. As the Anglican Catechism says, it is “an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace...”

Last but not least, confusion about baptism points us to vital importance of evangelization and teaching... There are many folks around us who have a wobbly understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Among these points, they can be confused about exactly what baptism is about. Let's live our faith, and teach the faith, with joy and confidence and sensitivity... There are so many hurting people around us who need to be brought into reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. May God the Holy Spirit equip us to do his work, all for his greater glory.

Amen.