

SERMON: "BEING BAPTIZED"

**TEXT: OLD TESTAMENT
NEW TESTAMENT**

**PSALM 29
MATTHEW 3:13-17**

**January 8, 2023
Baptism of the Lord Sunday**

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Ordination and Installation of Officers**

INTRODUCTION

Bats. The church was having a problem with bats
Older historic building, bats were getting in and making a mess.
Other churches in town were having the same problem
The Methodists hired a pest control company, kind of expensive
The Presbyterians hired a contractor, also expensive

The two pastors were complaining about the problem and the expense
at the monthly pastors gathering. They told the others about the problem
and about their solutions, neither of which worked. Frustrating.
Their Baptist colleague spoke up to say they had the same problem

The Presbyterian and Methodist thought they had someone to commiserate with
But no! The Baptist didn't have a bat problem anymore. The bats were gone
Eager to learn from their siblings in Christ, the other pastors asked how they did it.
The Baptist pastor shared their story. He said, 'We baptized those bats.
Haven't seen them back in church since.'

It is a cynical joke, I admit. It pokes fun at a tendency in cultures that see themselves
as 'Christian' to say that about themselves ... without much follow up.
Baptism. It is just the way it is, what people do (or are expected to do)
I've seen that in our own cultural expectations and experience
I saw it in the work I did on planning my sabbatical

The original plan included overseas travel (which I hoped might get funded by a grant)
I wanted to visit Armenia, the first nation to identify itself as Christian
It declared itself as such quite some time ago ... in 301
Today 97% of the population are members of the state church,
the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Talking with an Armenian Christian to plan my proposed trip I learned that while
that is true, nowhere near that many Armenians actually attend church regularly
She said, "Everyone here may not go to church, but we have all been baptized.
Everyone gets baptized. It is what we do, what we are expected to do."
I did not tell her the joke about baptizing bats

What does it mean to be baptized? Isn't it more, much more,
than just something Americans and Armenians do?
Let's ask that of ourselves as we consider,
like we do early in each new year, the story of Jesus' baptism.

BELOVED

What does it mean to be baptized? I'll try and answer that with some alliteration.
Being baptized is about being beloved, about belonging and about beginning
It did for Jesus with his baptism. It does for us.

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

Matthew tells the story of Jesus baptism, and unlike Luke and Mark,
adds the back and forth between Jesus and John
about whether or not Jesus needs to be baptized

That debate is settled when Jesus says in verse fifteen

Let it so now for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness

You see, reading Matthew up to this point is to read multiple versions
of him telling us "this is the guy, the promised Messiah." Scripture is fulfilled.
The story of Jesus baptism is a confirmation of his identity, of who he is
And now here, for emphasis, God says it. A voice from heaven declares
"This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

That is what Jesus' baptism and our baptism are both about ... identity!
This is who Jesus is. This is who I am. This is who you are! Beloved!

Johnny and I have the real honor of holding a child in our arms
and saying in effect "God loves this child ... always has and always will"
I love being able to say that and signal that with baptism
I've especially appreciated the times I've done the same with adults
We are loved by God! Beloved, even and especially after we stop being cute

Baptism is a sign of that love, God's love for us.
It is also a sign of us belonging to God ... and with one another.
You did notice how the title 'Beloved' is connected to relationship
"This is my son, the Beloved." We belong to God and are beloved by God.

Baptism is about our being connected, related, belonging together.
We've often understood baptism to be about belonging
Throughout history that is how people joined the church, professed their faith
In the earliest years it was about adults making that faith decision
Choosing to believe, choosing to belong

Then as we came to understand that grace comes first
We started baptizing our children as a sign of our faith in God's grace
In so doing that sense of belonging began earlier ... as children

BELONGING

Historically that shift coincided with the rise of nation states
and those nations / kingdoms seeing how religion can unify a people
So nations formed and fractured and fought over faith
The Roman Empire becomes the Holy Roman Empire
Armenia declares itself a Christian nation.
Jerusalem becomes a battlefield between beliefs

That history has shaped us ... and our view of baptism
It is what we do, who we are as Armenians and Americans
But then the question is raised. Is that what baptism is for us?
Is that sense of belonging now about where we are from?

I really like how Dietrich Bonhoeffer talked about community, about belonging
He did so in his book Life Together written while running an underground seminary
during the rise of Hitler's Germany (So he knew all too well the dangers of
national identity). He makes a simple point about our belonging.

He suggests that I am not directly related to you, I am related to you through Christ
The relationship is me to Christ to you and vice versa. We belong to each other
because we belong to Christ. Let me try to put that in Cedar Valley speak
Christ is the roundabout. That is how we connect

Our seemingly straight lines are connected by Jesus as that roundabout.
That is how we belong to Jesus. And through Jesus belong to
and with one another. We are connected and Jesus is the connector

In baptism, God says of each one of us that we are beloved and that we belong
We, along with Jesus, are God's beloved children with him and through him

And like Jesus our baptism, whenever it was, it marked a beginning
In each of the gospels, Jesus begins his ministry after his baptism
It is not just a connecting to God past tense
It is connecting to God's ongoing work present and future tense
Baptism is about getting started ... that's what Jesus did

Baptism is very much an ordination and installation to ministry
That is exactly why we begin not only the new year with the baptism of Jesus
This is where it falls in the telling of the story of his life and work
But we intentionally connect baptism to ordination and installation
The beginning of his ministry. The beginning of ours

Now you'll notice later in the service that the ordination and installation
includes people who are new to being an elder or deacon
and those who have done it before – some several times
I like that mix. Beginnings are not just once a upon a time
They happen again and again ... new beginnings

SUMMARY

After this relatively brief story, Jesus is sent to begin his ministry

That is what happens after baptism ... ministry begins.

It begins sometimes from scratch. Most of the time it begins anew.

It begins a new season building on all the seasons that went before it

Going all the way back to 1916 when this particular church was formed

Or going back a bit further to 301 for our Armenian siblings in Christ

Actually all the way back to John and Jesus standing in the Jordan

What baptism is, and always has been, is a beginning of one kind or another

What baptism is not is an end ...

except for maybe a few wayward Baptist bats.