

The Baptism of Our Lord  
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**Matthew 3:13-17**

The guy I dated in my 20's used to push my buttons by asking me questions about Christianity, as a mathematician and confirmed atheist, it gave him great joy to stump the philosophy major who leaned towards Christianity. This person asked me once why I celebrated "Zombie Jesus Day" when I said I was going to church on Easter, sometimes it was easier to answer the questions than others. But one that stumped me for a long time, was why did John start baptizing people? He asked, "Isn't it weird that this guy gathered people by the riverside to get dunked?"

But it isn't really that out of the ordinary, in religious traditions across the world, many include ritual bathing. In Islam, washing your feet, hands, and mouth before entering the Mosque is traditional. In Hinduism, swimming in the Ganges is an essential part of the faith. When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, Jews needed to be ritually clean to fully participate in the festivals and culture of the community. There are all kinds of rules about what is clean and unclean who is pure and impure in the Hebrew scriptures. John is the son of a priest in the Temple, remember Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in the eyes of God. So John would have been presumably familiar with the Law, the Prophets, and the Temple complex. He would be close to the leaders of the Temple.

It is pretty damning when the son of one of the priests starts calling people out of the Temple to bathe in the Jordan. When John calls for baptism it is of repentance, urging the Temple leaders to be in a right relationship with God, to repent and return to the Lord. Just a few weeks ago, we heard his brood of vipers sermon, and we know that surprisingly, people still showed up on the banks of the river where John was crying in the wilderness to participate in baptism.

However, the reason for the baptism of repentance to me seems pretty obvious. Sin makes one unclean, one way to demonstrate a desire to be clean is to take a bath, even if it is a symbolic act; it is an obvious connection. The bigger question for me and perhaps for some of you is, why do we baptize people now? Is our baptism the same as John's baptism, is it a baptism of repentance?

The short answer is No.

The long answer is: No, but ... we do still believe in repentance, reconciliation, and returning to the Lord. We maintain a sacrament that allows for that, now reconciliation or confession comes after baptism. Our baptism isn't the same as the baptism of John because the nature of baptism changed with Jesus. All those who are baptized as Christians are not baptized into a baptism of repentance, but into a baptism of adoption, one where we become part of Christ's body. Our baptism is not only about being made clean and being allowed into the community of faithful people; our baptism is about being recognized as part of God's beloved Son, with whom God is pleased. That answer would certainly not be one that my ex-boyfriend would accept, but it is one that gives us the most radical understanding of the transformation that occurs when we are baptized.

Today we are celebrating not only Jesus' baptism, but we are bringing two new members into the Body of Christ the church. A father and son actually, which is an exceptional thing. Indeed, it is more in line with the ancient tradition of the early Church baptismal practices. How many of you remember that in Early Christianity, entire households were baptized when the head of the household became a Christian? A household would include wives, children, and slaves, all of whom were considered the property of the individual choosing to be baptized. In the ancient church when a bishop returned to communities to baptize new households, children newly born into a household where the members were previously baptized would then be baptized. Our tradition of baptizing infants into the communion of saints is born out of this practice.

It is not the teaching of the Episcopal Church that babies are sinful, or that they are sentenced to limbo if they happen to die before they are baptized. Baptism is a sacrament of inclusion, not a golden ticket or fast pass into heaven.

What is interesting about the baptisms that are happening today is that here at the church, we got the application for little Ren before his father Peter decided that now would be a good time to be baptized too. It's almost as if the tables have turned. First, Megan, was baptized. Now as both wife and mother, with the choice to baptize their child has, in essence, welcomed Peter too. Isn't it funny how God works?

Today when we welcome Peter and Ren into the Body of Christ the Church, they will be welcomed into the household of God, they will be named and welcomed and loved as God's beloved children, and they will be forever changed because they have joined the household of Jesus. They will be invited to the table and commissioned as ministers in God's Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and they will become peers in Christ. It's a big deal to give up your power and become a sibling to your child. It's a big deal to give up your authority as the head of a household and ceded it to God. It's a big deal to decide to be baptized or to baptize your infant. It's not something that we come to unadvisedly or lightly; it is something that changes us forever.

It is a mystery; it is something that I cannot define or describe or research to the point that I would be able to explain it to anyone. It is something that you experience, that you need to live into, that calls you. This is why it is so important that we remember that what we are called matters. What we call one another matters. We no longer call one another friends or strangers when we are baptized. We call one another siblings, drawn into the household of God, adopted and marked as God's own forever.

I understand baptism to be a time of ontological change. A change of the very fiber of our being, our cosmic makeup, our identities

affirmed, our names pronounced, our vocations proclaimed. As ministers of God, we are members of a community of believers, we are no longer left alone to our own devices. Still, we rely on one another, our siblings in the Church, but not only one another, but God the omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and benevolent being. Our God, who is all, and who is with all, and who is in all. The God who loves us so much that the incarnate Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ the Righteous came down and walked into the Jordan and changed the nature of baptism from one of repentance to one of inclusion. It is through Jesus that we are named, it is through the Spirit that we are called, it is through Christ that we are born into eternal life.

Let us remember that as we affirm our faith/ renew our baptismal promises today and as we welcome Ren and Peter into the household of God. We believe in the Trinity, we renounce Satan, we repent and return to the Lord, we pray, learn and live in community, we seek Christ and recognize Christ in one another, and we pursue justice freedom and peace. We are the Church, together, through baptism. amen.