

“Remember Your Baptism”

Based on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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“Remember your baptism and be thankful.” These are the traditional words that accompany the action of coming forward to the baptismal font, dipping your finger in the baptismal waters, and claiming anew the baptismal covenant that you entered in to. “Remember your baptism.” Do you remember yours? This is where I got stuck for a long time. I don’t remember my baptism. Probably like most of us gathered here, I was a baby when I was baptized. I have been told about my baptism. It was at the church I grew up in, St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City. Mack Stokes was the pastor who baptized me, who four years later became a bishop. My mom said I didn’t cry. That’s all I can tell you about my baptism. I sometimes envy those who got baptized when they were old enough to remember it. When they go before the font and are told to remember their baptism they can go back in their mind’s eye to that place, visualize who was there, feel the sensation of the water on their heads, or even their whole bodies if it was a full emersion. Those folks can remember their baptism and be thankful. But not those of us who were baptized as infants. It’s like we got cheated. The best we can do is remember that we were baptized; that getting baptized was something important for our parents. That we are baptized is something we are to be thankful for. We just can’t say much about how it happened.

Today we remember Jesus’ baptism, a baptism that was remembered differently by the gospel writers. As Mark tells it, Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan and just as Jesus was coming out of the water he saw the heavens torn apart, the Spirit like a dove descending on him, and he heard the voice from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” As Matthew tells it, John resists baptizing Jesus, 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.” For John the gospel writer, he

doesn't explicitly say that Jesus was baptized. Instead, he relates that John the Baptist saw the Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove, and then John heard the voice of the one who sent him to baptize with water say to him, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." Why John the gospel writer refrained from saying that Jesus was baptized was maybe to avoid the problem of why Jesus was baptized in the first place, a problem that Matthew addressed head on. Why did Jesus receive the baptism of repentance that John offered? It was to fulfill all righteousness. It was just the right thing to do.

Luke's memory of Jesus' baptism is a lot like Mark's: brief. But Luke adds a couple of details that are important. He begins by saying, "When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized." No dialog with John. It is not specifically said that John baptized Jesus. Instead, we are given an image of everyone standing in line to receive the baptism of repentance, to experience a fresh start, a clean slate, and Jesus got in line with everyone else. Jesus didn't need a fresh start or a clean slate. But he didn't stand apart while everyone else got in line. In an act of solidarity, Jesus got in line with everyone else. Jesus participated in baptism with the people.

The second detail is that after Jesus was baptized "and was praying" the heaven opened, the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." For Luke, he stressed that Jesus was a man of prayer. In key moments throughout his ministry, Luke notes that Jesus prayed. He prayed at his baptism, before he chose his disciples, before he told them for the first time that he would be crucified, at his transfiguration, before he taught his disciples the Lord's prayer, before he was betrayed and arrested, and when he took his last breath on the cross. At one place in the gospel, after having done many healings, Luke says Jesus spent the night alone in prayer. And so, as Luke tells it, as Jesus prayed, the heavens were opened and the Spirit descended upon him. It seems it was the act of Jesus praying that caused the heavens to open and the Spirit to come down to empower him for his ministry, and to hear the voice of his Father say, "You are my Son, my

beloved, and I am so proud of you.” Jesus needed that empowerment and affirmation because immediately after his baptism he was driven into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. And then, having passed those tests, he began his public ministry. At thirty years of age, the time of preparation was over. The time had come for Jesus to fulfill his destiny, to do what God had sent him to do. So he needed the power of the Spirit. He needed to hear that affirmation from his heavenly Father. And prayer caused that to happen. Prayer opened up the heavens for blessings to come down. In the same way, when the disciples were gathered in the upper room, and were praying together, the Holy Spirit came upon them like a mighty wind and tongues of fire appeared on each of their heads. Prayer caused that to happen. When we pray, the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends upon us again, and God can speak to us what we need to hear: you are my beloved, you are forgiven, be encouraged, there is hope, all will be well, I will never leave you nor forsake you. How good it is that Luke adds this detail of Jesus’ baptism, that after he was baptized he was praying.

And so we can approach the renewal of our baptism in prayer. When we renew our baptismal covenant, we don’t get to repeat our baptism. As United Methodists, we believe that you only get baptized once. Baptism is an action of God by means of water and in the power of the Holy Spirit. And God doesn’t make mistakes! Since God acted in your baptism, then your baptism took. No do overs. But, of course, we can renew our baptismal covenant as often as we wish, in an attitude of prayer, following the example of Jesus.

We should come back to our baptismal covenant, to remember that we are baptized, to bring ourselves back to that watershed moment in our lives in Christ. It didn’t seem like a watershed moment to you if it happened when you were a baby or a young person. But it was, whether you were aware of it or not. It was at your baptism that the people of God publically witnessed God claiming you as one of God’s own children. You were marked publically as a child of God, a child of promise. We claim that anew when we renew our baptism, that we are children of God. To renew our baptism is an important way for us to live out that baptismal covenant that God has made with us, that we are

God's children. We spend the rest of our lives living out of this covenant God has made with us by water and the Spirit. You could say that one purpose of the church is to help each other live out our baptism. We get baptized once, but the implications of that baptism play out the rest of our lives. The journey begins at baptism and ends when we stand before the throne and hear God say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant." And all through that journey we have our brothers and sisters in Christ on the journey with us. We never travel alone.

So it is good to renew our baptism from time to time. It makes sense to do it on the Sunday that we remember that Jesus was baptized. It also happens to be near the beginning of the year. It is a good time for a fresh start. And it's not just because it's January. We are also in the midst of winter. This is the time when, for us in the northern hemisphere, the earth is sort of in a reset mode, a time to prepare and get ready for the burst of growth that will be unleashed in the spring. Winter is the prelude to the vitality of spring. Maybe for us right now can be the prelude to a season of spiritual vitality and renewal. Remembering our baptism can be a part of that prelude to spiritual renewal.

Renewing our baptism with prayer opens up the heavens for the Holy Spirit to come down upon us again. We can perhaps feel God's presence as we touch the baptismal waters. And maybe we will hear in our hearts the affirmation of God's love, to hear God say to each of us, "You are my son, my daughter, and I love you." We need to hear that affirmation now and then from those close to us, our family, our dearest friends, to be told "I love you." We need to know that somebody loves us. It makes a difference. In the same way, it makes a difference for us to know that God loves us, and to hear God say that, in the quiet of our hearts.

Renewing our baptism also gives us the opportunity to reclaim the authority we have to be ministers of Jesus Christ in the world. If you think I'm the only minister in this room, you would be wrong. The church I grew up in listed all the church staff in the bulletin, the senior pastor, the associate, director of music, youth director, etc. But at the end of the list it had for minister: the congregation. We are all ministers by the authority of the baptism we have received. When it comes to

ministering in the world, of sharing the love of Jesus and helping others in Jesus' name, you don't need my permission. You have all the authority you need. Reaffirming our baptism reminds us of the authority we have to be ministers of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

In a moment, we are going to participate in the renewal of our baptismal covenant. The ushers are not going to direct you forward. I will invite you to come as you feel led to do so. Please don't feel obligated to come forward. If you have not been baptized and you desire to be, you are welcome to come forward in anticipation of your baptism. Talk to me. It would be my joy to talk with you about the meaning of baptism and plan for you to receive baptism for yourself. I invite you now to remember your baptism, and be thankful.