

Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of Our Lord or First Sunday after the Epiphany

St. Mary the Virgin

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<sup>13</sup> At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. <sup>14</sup> John tried to stop him and said, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> Jesus answered, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness." So John agreed to baptize Jesus. <sup>16</sup> When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. <sup>17</sup> A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him." (CEB)

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If there is any sacrament we Christians know what means, it's baptism. Or do we? Since most if not all of you have heard me before you will not be surprised that I'm about to say that much of what we think we know about baptism is, if not wrong, then at least incomplete.

I was baptized on Easter Eve in 1948. I have no idea what day or month that was but when one is a candidate for ordination you have to give your baptismal date so I gave the liturgical one and no one ever questioned me. So that's one reason for baptism. It's a necessary precondition for ordination to the priesthood.

For many baptism is fire insurance, it protects us from hell and forces God to choose us. I don't believe baptism is fire insurance and that has caused me problems. In the mid-80s I was rector of a church in Weston, Conn. Weston is a small wealthy town in Fairfield County and some of those who have homes there use them only on weekends. A prominent theater family was on the books of Emmanuel Church, and while they spent their weekends in Weston, I never met them. As happens their child and spouse produced a grandchild and they all wanted the baby done. I said I'd be glad to baptize the new grandchild, but the parents had to attend either Emmanuel or a church close to them in the City at least three times, undergo baptismal instruction, by me or the pastor of that church, and then I'd baptize the baby at the Vigil, or on Pentecost, or All Saints or some other service. I was told politely that this was a very busy young couple and their parents were very important people, and they just wanted a private baptism so why not go along? Perhaps the church would realize a financial windfall? Being me, I refused and said that I thought if we were baptizing someone into the church then it wasn't too much to expect the parents to attend three times, any church, be instructed and then have the baptism on a Sunday.

We had a serious miss communication. For them baptism was a rite of passage normal for good families followed by a reception in which everyone told the parents how wonderful the baby was and discussed what it meant if the baby cried or didn't cry when baptized. For me it was a sign that one is joining a Christian community with intention.

The Vestry and I had a heated discussion that went on for a long time and spilled over into the parish. Someone had the bright idea of having my predecessor baptize the baby privately on an afternoon at the church, and, as rector, I refused. Eventually the issue went away and I didn't suffer for it. I have no idea what happened to the baby. I never met the grandparents or parents but I know they were important.

Is that what baptism is about?

If we read the bible essentially everything we know about baptism is alien to what we read in the Gospels and Paul.

The bible has no concept of Original Sin, that's a controversial statement but I'll stick to it. There are interesting and strongly held theological understandings of Original Sin and I can appreciate that. However, to find Original Sin in the second creation story is to seriously misread it. So, baptism does not wash away Original Sin, at least if we depend upon the bible. Infants aren't baptized in the bible. Only adults. Households are baptized so presumably if a household was baptized all members, regardless of age, were baptized. Baptism is always by immersion, no sprinkling a little bit of water from a gold or sterling liturgical item. Fortunately, here we baptize with a lot of water. We don't immerse but we're not tidy either.

The bible is silent on whether or not baptism can be repeated. The bible, even Paul, doesn't insist upon baptism prior to admission to communion. One could make an argument from silence that baptism was never considered, at least in scripture, as the single requirement for receiving the body and blood of Christ.

I know that when I celebrate here on weekdays from time-to-time I administer the sacrament to non-baptized people. I remember vividly walking out to greet a visitor who had come to communion. She was holding the wafer in her hand and asked me what to do with it. I replied that she should eat it, which she did.

When so-called early communion was introduced into TEC in the late 70s and 80s parents would object that their children had no idea what they were doing. I asked the parents to explain to me what they believed happened when they received the sacrament? They couldn't. I then said that children understand mystery better than we adults and I want to hold onto that and I don't want any child to remember being turned away from communion. For me baptism and eucharist cannot be explained away as rational acts. They are mysteries.

Theologians have wrestled with what it means for Jesus, who we usually describe as *without sin*. To be baptized. Some have speculated that in being baptized Jesus took on all of our sins, a theological point we make many times, and was baptized for all of us. I agree that Jesus does take on all of our sins on the Cross, but since I reject Original Sin, I don't see his baptism as him taking on sins or his having sinned.

Scholars of the NT speculate that Baptism was such a dramatic action by John the Baptist, that Matthew, Mark and Luke mention that Jesus was baptized to defuse the cult of John the Baptist. This is certainly a possibility and our reading of the Acts of Apostles and the Epistles can support the continued appeal of the Cult of John the Baptist in the early decades of the church. So, this is a possibility.

However, the real climax of the story is the Voice from Heaven.

We just heard: Matt 3<sup>17</sup> A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him." (CEB)

Everyone present at the baptism hears this voice and everyone is told that Jesus is the Son of God. The implication is that Jesus has always been the Son of God and this

is revealed publicly, for the first time, in Matthew at the baptism. It has not been a secret in Matthew, but this is the first significant public announcement. Of course, no one has any idea what it means and we know that by the end of the Gospel Jesus will be abandoned.

In contrast in Luke 3 we read: <sup>21</sup> When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." (CEB)

Apparently, everyone sees the heavens opened, may see the Holy Spirit, but the announcement seems only to be heard by Jesus so no one else learns that Jesus is God's coeternal son. Scholars understand this to be, nevertheless, an announcement that Jesus is coeternal.

Mark 1 has yet another take: <sup>10</sup> While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. <sup>11</sup> And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." (CEB).

I quote the CEB for consistency since I used it for Matthew and Luke. I think it actually mistranslates the Greek<sup>1</sup>. The NRSVue has a better translation: And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

While this causes us all kinds of theological problems it would appear that in Mark, a Gospel that lacks the birth narratives, Jesus is informed at the baptism that he's God's son! I cannot know that this was Mark's intent, since the language is ambiguous. **In Mark only Jesus sees the heavens open and only Jesus hears the voice.**

What has that to do with you and me? For me the purpose of baptism, and I will baptize babies, is that it's a reminder of prevenient grace. It's the public announcement that similar to the announcement to our Savior, we have always been a child of God and we have always been loved. We are reminded in baptism, we meaning those who observe it as well as those being baptized, that God calls us before we can respond. God loves us first.

I do not believe in Believer Baptism because it is not about understanding. You might think that this contradicts my position on attending church and receiving instruction but it doesn't. It's not obvious that we are talking about God loving us first or prevenient grace and that's such a central facet in our faith that we need to be told what's being done to us or to the person being baptized. We can be informed of what is happening but ultimately it is a mystery. God not only loves us when we're unlovable God has loved us our entire lives, before we can respond and even when we deny or respond poorly. That's why we baptize. That's why I believe baptism should be part of regular worship on Sundays or feasts. We need the reminder that we have not earned our faith or our place in the kingdom, our very lives are a response to God's love. That's the transformation Jesus made in the baptism of John the Baptist. He demonstrated that it's where we get a physical reminder that we are loved by God. Always and forever.

The challenge for the baptized, you and me, is to live with this as our foundational belief and act out of it in all we do.

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<sup>1</sup> καὶ φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν· Σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα.