

## "WHY WE BAPTIZE"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
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Matthew 3:13-17

Early in this century, Lucy was born in England. Her grandmother took her to the local Methodist chapel to be baptized. Lucy's father was skeptical about a Methodist baptism as the Church of England does not recognize Methodist ordination, so he took Lucy to be baptized in the Anglican Church. Lucy's mother was a convert to the Salvation Army who didn't think much of either the Methodists or the Anglicans, so she took Lucy to the local citadel for presentation under the banner of blood and fire - the Salvation Army counterpart to baptism. In time, the family emigrated to the United States, and became Methodists as there was neither an Episcopalian Church nor a Salvation Army citadel. When Lucy was confirmed, the minister did not believe in infant baptism, so much to Lucy's parents surprise, Lucy was again baptized, along with the other members of the confirmation class. When Lucy married, she married a Baptist, and in becoming a Baptist, because the Baptists do not recognize other baptisms, and certainly not sprinkling, Lucy was again baptized, this time by immersion. Five times Lucy was baptized. Five times Lucy was initiated into Christ's church. How many times can one person be initiated?

Why do we baptize? There is much confusion, misunderstanding, and just plain ignorance about baptism. Baptism has lost much of its significance and meaning. In our country it has become a cultural nicety, almost part of being an American. Getting the baby baptized is something that "everybody does". Picture this conversation in many homes. The wife says, "Honey, don't you think it is time to get Esmerelda baptized?" "Oh, you think so?" "Yes, Mother is getting nervous about it. She keeps asking when we are going to get Esmerelda baptized." "Do I have to stand in front of everyone at church? What do I wear? Well, I guess we had better do it. Just don't pick a Sunday when there is a football game!"

Contrast the haphazard, lazy, indifferent approach to baptism, which is common today, with that of Christians in Soviet Russia. Can you imagine the courage, the determination it must take to take a public stand hostile to the state and seek Christian baptism?

Contrast our attitude to that of the early church. Consider the magnitude of the baptism act, administered in the catacombs of Rome, under the city, in secret. To be baptized was to become an enemy of the emperor, a subversive. Christians were fed to hungry lions in front of cheering spectators. It is said that the emperor, Nero, would have Christians tied to stakes throughout his garden, ignite them, and then stroll through his garden by the light of burning Christians. Baptism was no haphazard, ho-hum "nice thing to do".

The rite, the ritual of baptism was also quite different in the early church. We are fortunate to have several documents written between 100 and 200 A.D. in which baptism is described. The documents seem to have been written to the Roman emperor, explaining what Christians believed and did, in an attempt to convince the emperor that Christianity was not a subversive movement. Because Christians met and worshipped in secret, many rumors of Christian practices circulated which were erroneous and destructive.

At this time in history, a person who requested baptism entered a three-year waiting period, during which they studied. They were allowed to be present for part of the worship service, for the Scripture readings and sermons, but no unbaptized person could participate in prayers nor in Holy Communion, because they were not yet joined to Christ, nor members of his body, the church. This practice was probably instituted to keep spies out of the fellowship. By the time the three-year waiting period was over, the prospect had proved to be genuine.

In the New Testament, there are instances of immediate, on-the-spot baptisms, such as Pentecost when 3,000 were baptized, following Peter's powerful sermon, or in Phillippi when Paul immediately baptized the astounded jailer who believed in the power of God when an earthquake released Paul and Silas from their cells. But, soon the church began to delay baptism, probably because of the persecution. Many were falling away from the faith, because they didn't fully understand nor were they ready to endure persecution.

At the end of the three year period, the congregation voted to admit the candidate for baptism. After the vote, the final stage of preparation began. This stage is what we now know as Lent, the forty day period preceding Easter. During Lent, they engaged in intensive study, fasting, and exorcism rites. The intent was to release them from the power of the devil. The leaders breathed into the faces of the candidates, anointed them with oil, and made the sign of the cross upon them.

The actual baptism service began before dawn on Easter Sunday. The congregation and candidates gathered for a vigil service the night before, symbolizing the victory of Christ over the powers of darkness. At Easter daybreak, the celebration of Christ's resurrection over death and evil, the catechumens were baptized. They took off their clothes, symbolizing the putting off of the old life, and answered three questions demonstrating their faith in God and their desire to commit themselves to Jesus Christ. After each question, the water was administered, probably poured over them, as the earliest of paintings illustrate. The questions were antecedents of the Apostles' Creed. Infants were baptized first, then children, and finally the adults. After the water of baptism had been administered, they were dressed in new white garments, symbolizing the receiving of a new life.

The water and dramatic acts of baptism have significant symbolism and meaning which we have lost or diluted through these intervening years. Baptism is God's act of reaching out, claiming, and receiving a person into the kingdom, into a new life, a new order. In baptism, we are initiated into a new order of creation, the kingdom of Christ. In baptism, God makes a covenant with us. In baptism, Christ gives the church a sign of the ultimate victory. Baptism expresses our hope.

We celebrate the baptism of our Lord on this Sunday, the first Sunday after Epiphany. The gospel lesson described the baptism of Jesus by John, the baptizer. The baptism of Jesus is the proclamation of the gospel in its fullness. Jesus came out of the water, the heavens opened, the dove appeared, and a voice spoke, "This is my son with whom I am well pleased." The water, dove, and voice are all related to the opening words of Genesis. Darkness, chaos, water were the elements out of which God created. The spirit moved over the water, creating the heavens and the earth. God spoke and said, "Let there be light."

The dove also connects Jesus' baptism with Noah. Noah sent out a dove to see if the flood waters had receded so that he and his family could leave the ark. The same water that flooded the world in destruction, floated the ark, and saved Noah.

Jesus' baptism demonstrated the new order of creation. Jesus initiated a new creation; the water is now symbolizing God's new creation, a new world, a new kingdom, a new life. Jesus is the new ark of salvation. All who are in Christ, baptized in Christ, are saved, floating on the waters of destruction.

The water of baptism symbolizes the washing away of sin, and the old life. Water symbolizes the making of a new life, a new birth. As a new-born baby comes out of the womb in water, so a person is re-born in the water of baptism. The early church bishops breathed on the candidates for baptism, as God's spirit breathed on Adam and Eve, and they became living souls, living persons. The baptized is initiated into a new order of creation, energized by the Holy Spirit.

Then, in the early church, after persons were baptized at dawn on Easter, they were anointed with oil, the sign of the cross was made on their foreheads, and they were greeted by the congregation with a kiss of peace and welcomed to Holy Communion in joy and thanksgiving. All those who were baptized were now welcome at the table -

infants and children as well as adults. Baptism is the prerequisite for Communion, as Methodists have historically observed, not a certain age or understanding. Children are welcome to participate in Communion, even before they can reason or understand.

In fact, following the Easter celebration in the early church, the newly baptized then returned every day the next week, dressed in their new robes, and received instruction in the meaning of the sacraments, baptism and communion. They first experienced baptism and communion; then they learned what they had done. A full understanding follows, not precedes. Therefore, we believe in infant baptism, and encouraging children to receive Communion.

Let me summarize. Baptism is the initiation rite into the church. Baptism is the act of God, seeking and receiving a person. Baptism is the entry into God's new order. The baptized person now lives in joyful obedience. The baptized person has died to the old life, died to this world, changed clothes. Nothing can hurt or harm the baptized person because we have already died to this world and have already been raised to the new life in Christ's new age.

"I am baptized!" is a word of assurance. Once and for all, I have been baptized. I have been initiated into Christ, and now I live, grow, and prosper in Christ." Living the Christian life is the response to God's covenant in baptism. That is why we baptize: the old has passed away; behold, the new has come!

"W H Y   W E   B A P T I Z E"

MATTHEW 3:13-17

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