



*Living Into Our Baptism*

Mark 1: 4-11

January 7, 2018 • The Baptism of Christ Sunday

First Federated Church, Peoria, Illinois

The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.

*Text:*

*"You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased." (v. 11)*

Theologians have debated for centuries about why Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. After all, if John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sin, why was Jesus baptized? Did he need his sins to be washed away?

And why should we be baptized? Is it just something that we do? That's the way it seems to be with some families. I get a phone call and a parent wants to their child "done" or "christened". When I'm in my whimsical moments I will politely tell the caller that we "christen" ships and baptize babies.

Does any of this matter; Jesus' baptism and our baptism? I think that it does. I sent to notes to individuals who were baptized as adults during my tenure at First Federated Church reminding them that this is the Baptism of the Lord Sunday and encouraging them to worship us so that they, too, can renew their baptism vows. But, in the face of everything that is going on in this world;

This is the time of year that high school seniors are getting their letters of acceptance or rejection from universities;

Many wonder about their job security and more and more people find themselves cobbling together two or more jobs trying to make ends meet and hoping against hope that no one in the family gets sick because they don't have health insurance.

There increasing polarization in society as more and more people retreat into their own little cocoons and echo chambers isolating themselves in "red" and "blue" enclaves. What we need are more "purples".

Some have experienced unexpected turns in health, not for the better while others know the grief of the death of a loved one and wonder how they will cope. Some have had someone they love not love them back and walk out of their life.

With all of this going on, why talk about baptism? We talk about it because our baptism is connect to all of these situations and more. Baptism contains a good news that we need to hear. So let's go back to our questions. Why was Jesus baptized? The Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, but he did not sin. As a matter of fact, immediately following his baptism Jesus was led into the wilderness - that wild place of chaos from whence some people never return—where he was tempted but did not succumb.

Scottish theologian, minister and writer of an earlier day, James S. Stewart in his book *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ*, gave me the greatest and simplest understanding of Jesus' baptism when he noted that the point of all of the gospels is the Cross and the Empty Tomb of Easter. In his baptism, the writer of Mark's gospel, and indeed, all of the synoptic gospels is a foreshadowing of Jesus being "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Jesus baptism was an act of identification with us, each one of us.

But what about the other and perhaps more relevant questions. What significance is baptism? What difference does it make? Lutheran theologian, homiletics professor and seminary president David Lose provided me with new insight into this question when he noted that in his baptism Jesus was rather passive. Jesus doesn't have to do anything. He simply receives; first the gift of the Holy Spirit and then God's favor.

Some of you read my blog, *Glimpses of Grace*, and you read of a young woman I met in Scotland last October. Learning that I am a Presbyterian minister, late one night she shared her frustration at not being able to find a church that would baptize her. Highly educated and doing post-graduate, fluent in several languages she found "elders" who said that she "flunked" - her words not mine - her test to be baptized. Yet, when she shared with me her faith story and understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, I found it totally within the bounds of the faith. And I thought to myself, "What have our churches become? What has Christianity become?" In Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28 he told his followers to go into all the world, baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe what he commanded and to remember that he would be with them to the end of time! First you baptize, then you teach. How could we have lost sight of this?!

John Calvin and the Protestant Reformers understood baptism to be the sign of a new covenant or testament, similar to circumcision. "It is a visible sign of an invisible truth." We are loved because God first loved us.

At his baptism Jesus heard the word of God's love and acceptance. Imagine how those words must have given him strength in the midst of his daily challenges and comfort in the midst of his trials, especially Gethsemane when he had to come starkly face to face with his own death.

It was said that when Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, faced times of great crisis that late at night he would make the sign of the Cross on his forehead and remind himself, "I have been baptized." Baptism reminds us that we do not belong to ourselves but to Another, the Creator of all that was and is and will be. And while many of us may not remember our own baptism, baptism reminds us that we are loved, not just by our family or our church community but by God!

How often have we longed to hear words of:

Acceptance,

Blessings,

Encouragement,

and Love.

In our baptism we, like Jesus, are passive recipients of God's Grace. We are reminded that we are loved not because of who we are but because of Whose we are.

While others may judge us, and while we may internalize their judgement and find ourselves "wanting", our baptism reminds us that in the sight of God and by God's grace, we are enough! We are enough because in life and in death we belong to God, as one of our confessional statements puts it. We are enough because we are God's child. It is the promise of baptism that braces us for life's challenges.

In this new year, on the first Sunday of that new year, our baptism give us the courage to start or end a relationship, enter a new school or chapter of life, face an illness or death, surmount an unseen challenge. Our baptism enables us to take the risk to love with no strings attached. And through it all, our baptism reminds us that God is Immanuel, "God with us."

The words that God spoke to Jesus at his baptism are our words, too; You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased.

Amen.