

## **Baptism of Christ Sunday/January 13, 2013**

**Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

**"Remember Your Baptism"**

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Today we celebrate and recall the **baptism of Jesus**. Baptism is the **earliest** of the church's sacraments. In fact, before there was a church, there was baptism. There are references of baptisms of **purification** in the Old Testament, and there was apparently some form of **washing rituals** similar to baptism beginning in Judaism after the Babylonian exile.

In the New Testament we have **John the Baptist** calling people to a **baptism of repentance** for the forgiveness of sins, a **turning** from an old way of life to a new way, a **rite of preparation** for the coming Kingdom of God, a **symbolic gesture** to declare **publicly** one's commitment to living a life based on the **expectation** of something **new** being revealed by God, even the coming of God's anointed, the Messiah, and the realm or way of life that such a person would bring.

John's baptism called people to **repentance** and to know in their hearts **God's forgiveness** which would allow them to **live in a new way**, to have a new start. And Matthew's gospel tells us, that Jesus' ministry and preaching would be about this same thing, **repentance for the forgiveness of sins**.

Now it is interesting that the **Biblical record does not tell us that Jesus baptized**. In the gospels, when Jesus calls the disciples, there is no mention that he baptizes them. Only in John's gospel in the 3rd and 4th chapters do we have some discussion going on about the **difference between** John's baptisms and Jesus' baptisms. But then in John 4:2 we have this **curious little note**, written almost as an aside, "*although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples*". Some **scholars** are **certain** that **Jesus did baptize**, while others say there is **no basis** upon which to know that and that **perhaps he did not**. John proclaimed that the coming one, the Messiah, who **we** know in Jesus, was to **baptize with the Holy Spirit**. But that happens **only after the resurrection**, when the **resurrected Jesus** sends the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, gathered there in Jerusalem, at what we call **Pentecost**.

But today I want to talk a bit about what baptism means for us. For some Christians, baptism is necessary for **sanctification** and thus for making our way into **heaven**. For others, baptism is a more a **rite of acceptance** into the **Church universal, the Body of Christ**. All Christians acknowledge the idea that baptism is **only necessary once**, however, some denominations do not accept the **validity** of other churches and therefore do not accept their baptisms and require a person to be baptized in their way, even if they have been baptized before, what we might call **re-baptism**.

**Is baptism necessary for salvation?** The great Protestant Reformer, **Ulrich Zwingli** didn't think so. Neither do the **Quakers**. In our United Church of Christ and in this local church, I would say that we believe **God's love already is extended to all**, and is conveyed to all before and without the sacrament of baptism or the Lord's Supper/Communion. However, we believe in the practice of baptism as a **sign**, a **sacrament**, for ourselves and for one another, acknowledging God's love and

acceptance of us and that it does an **inner, spiritual work within us**. Something we may not readily see but something we can indeed know and allow to work within us, to change us.

In today's passage from Luke, we hear of **Jesus' baptism by John**. It is very similar to the accounts given in the other **Synoptic gospels**, Matthew and Mark. But the differences, though **subtle**, emphasize **two** different things going on. Here, Jesus' baptism is both **personal** as well as **communal**. In both Matthew and Mark, when Jesus comes up out of the water, **he himself** sees the Spirit descend upon him. Then in Matthew, the **voice** seems to speak to the **crowd**, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."* In Mark, that **voice speaks directly to Jesus**, *"You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."*

In Luke, we have the same **personal hearing** of the voice as in Mark, but it seems the whole event is **witnessed by those gathered** around. Luke also adds this special note that says, *"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying . . ."* we get this sense that Jesus is more **part of the community**, he is **one** with those who are gathered there to be baptized, he is **one of them** and they are **one with him**. Also the note about his praying is **unique** and a **primary theme** throughout Luke. **Prayer**, especially **Jesus in prayer**, is very important within this gospel.

Of course, as I thought about baptism, it made me think upon **my own baptism**. I was baptized as an infant, less than 4 months old. I have a little book that has the **certificate of my baptism** within it. Hear what the certificate says (read *Certificate of Baptism*). I also have a copy of the **bulletin** from that day. On the back is listed the names of the **5** of us who were baptized, all under 1 year of age. We were baptized by Rev. Wagner but we were **really baptized by the entire church**. Of course I cannot recall that day but I can imagine that it would have been a pretty important day in the life of that little Methodist congregation, having **5 children baptized**. What I do know is that as I grew up in that church, those who **witnessed my baptism** took seriously their **vows and responsibilities** to be a part of my religious upbringing. Many of them would take an **active role** in my **spiritual development**, whether by teaching Sunday School, being part of my involvement in the church choir, youth group ("MYF"), or other church activities, or by just being **present** in my life, voicing their support or even concern for me, as I grew up in their presence. **Even today**, when I return to my father's church, some of those people are still there and still acknowledge a connection, a friendship, a relationship in Christ, that we share because of our baptism. Those **bonds of love** are **sacred** to me.

For us, here at First Church, **baptism is a sign** of both our **personal relationship** with the **Spirit of God** as well as an **experience of the love** that connects us **communally**, with one another. We are to **hear and take to heart** those same words of God's voice that Jesus heard, *"You are my son, you are my daughter, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* As we remember our baptism, may we know **that love of God for ourselves** as well as share it with **one another, nurturing, caring for, encouraging one another**, especially our **young ones**, that it may grow and take hold in their hearts, giving them that inner peace, strength and joy, that **all God's children** should know. Amen.