

Baptism of The Lord Sunday Sermon: “Baptism and Renewal”

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

Salem United Methodist Church

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The Christmas season is officially over. The decorations are put away until next year. And the Baptism of the Lord Sunday kicks off the season of Epiphany. We leap from Jesus as a baby in the manger to a 30 year old Jesus being inaugurated as the Messiah through his baptism in the Jordan River. Remember during Advent we talked about Bethlehem breaking into the bedlam of our world? Well, today we will see how God continues to break into the craziness of our world through the covenant of baptism.

Books have been written about baptism and what it means to us as believers and as a church of believers. We could talk about the many different aspects of baptism. There is one word that could sum up what baptism is about and that is the word, love. Baptism is the story of divine love for humanity. This story comes to us in five parts. In the first part of the baptism story we see the glory of God’s creation in water. In the second part we come to an understanding of our covenant relationship with God. The third part of the story is about those who receive baptism coming to know who Jesus is in our lives. The fourth part is about understanding our role in the church. And in the fifth part, we experience the coming of the Kingdom of God in our lives. Thus baptism is the story of divine love for all humanity.

The first part of the baptism story is about water and creation. Before God created light, there was water. Genesis 1:2 states that on the first day “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Then God created light. On the second day, God deals with the water again. He “separates the waters from the waters” to create a dome which he calls sky. On the third day, God continues to work with the waters and gathers it together to create dry land. All this had to take place so the water would be available for life on this planet: vegetation, animals, and humans that God was creating next. In the baptism covenant which we will read later there is a prayer that gives thanks for water and its role in the Bible. This prayer includes creation, Noah being saved through water and the covenant made with the rainbow, God saving the Israelites by separating of the sea, and leading them to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. The prayer continues with Jesus being nurtured in the water of the womb (Aren’t we all?), and speaks to Jesus being baptized by John with water and the Holy Spirit. Water then becomes a reminder to us of our salvation. God saves with water. We are saved by water and the Spirit. Our sins including the ones we have committed and haven’t committed yet are forgiven and washed away. Water is a gift of God. Physically we need it to survive. An adult body is about 65% water. We need water to keep us hydrated and to keep us clean. Spiritually, water reminds us of God’s great love for us. Every time we jump in a swimming pool or the ocean, every time we take a shower, or get a drink of water, we can be reminded of God’s love for us. It is a tangible reminder of the inward grace of the Holy Spirit. When we are baptized, we are baptized by both Water and the Spirit. Jesus was. We see in Luke’s version that John states, “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,” which leads me to the second part of the baptism story, covenant.

This year we are offering a Bible Study called Covenant. In this study we are reading the books of the Bible through the lens of Covenant. We have learned that Covenant is not a contract, but Covenant is a relationship. God calls us into this Covenant, into this relationship. We speak of the marriage covenant which is created when two unrelated persons agree to be in a relationship for a lifetime. Two friends become a family who are connected by God’s love. God’s Covenant calls us to be in relationship with God. And that relationship is based on God’s love. In this relationship we agree to allow God to be our God. We agree to allow Jesus to be Savior and Lord and to live according to his way. God agrees to give us a new life and we agree to live this new life so that it looks like God’s love. We agree to love God and to love God’s people. Within this covenant God trusts us to be faithful and we trust God to be faithful to us. And with this Covenant we are given a new identity. We are called by name. We belong to God. We become a son or daughter of God. In the biblical accounts of Jesus’ baptism, God calls him, “Son.” Jesus’ identity is announced to the people. God also announces that God loves Jesus and is proud of him with these words. “You are my Son, whom I dearly love: in you I find happiness.” Or some versions use the word, “beloved,” and “in whom I am well pleased. These words changed

Jesus' life. Just like in Jesus' baptism, our baptism Covenant we come to know that we are loved by God and God is proud of our choice to accept this offer of the Covenant. This changes our lives.

This is the reason why in The United Methodist Church we only baptize once because we believe this Covenant is only made once and upheld by God for eternity. This is also the reason that we will baptize anyone of any age. Through our Baptism, we continue to receive the blessings and grace of the Covenant every day through the power of the Holy Spirit. And every day we can renew our covenant relationship with God as we live it. We need to renew our covenant with God regularly so we do not forget who God is in our lives and who we are to God. Renewal of the Baptism Covenant could be akin to a couple renewing their marriage vows. Today we will have this opportunity to renew our Baptismal Covenant with God.

The third part of the Baptism story of divine love is coming to know who Jesus is in our lives. Did you notice in Luke's version that Jesus was baptized with everyone? He stood in solidarity with the community of sinners, people who were worn down with the burdens of this world, people who had given up on themselves, and possibly even given up on God. These people were looking for a new hope, only to discover that their hope was already with them. God came in the flesh to be with them and us. In Baptism and the renewing of the Covenant, we claim Jesus to be our Savior. We claim that we need saving from our selfishness, our hate, and from the "wears and tears" of the world. In our Baptism and the renewing of the Covenant, we receive forgiveness of our sins as we claim Jesus to be our Lord. We claim that we will follow no other than Jesus. He's our man! In our baptism we are incorporated into Christ. We are united with him and united with all who are also united with him. This leads into the next part of the story of divine love-The Church.

God created the church for the purpose of witnessing God's love to the world. The Church is a body of believers who are a corporate unity. The Church is not a group of individuals. We are one in Christ. Our Baptism may be personal, but our baptism also incorporates us into the Body of Christ which is the Church. This is why in The United Methodist Church we do not have private baptisms. The Church promises to surround the one(s) baptized with a community of love and forgiveness so they may grow in their trust of God and be faithful in serving others. In our Baptism each of us is now part of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit we can live Christ like lives. Yet at the same time each of us are part of the local faith community and also the entire Church of Jesus Christ or as the Apostles Creed states, "the holy, catholic (universal) church." We are brothers and sisters in Christ with all believers in every part of the world and throughout time. We are brothers and sisters with Christians in Russia, Africa, Latin America, Syria, and every part of the world. We are brothers and sisters in Christ with the first followers of Jesus: Mary, Martha, James, and Peter. We are siblings of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Augustine, John Wesley, Martin Luther, and all the communion of saints. Baptism creates the Church, the community of believers with the purpose to witness and serve others.

The final part of the divine story of love is about God breaking into our world bringing the Kingdom of God to us. We see this in Jesus' baptism. "While he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove." Heaven broke into our world. The Holy Spirit came down. But did you notice when it happened? While Jesus was praying. Through prayer he was open to receiving the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God that broke through the heavens and came to earth. Prayer plays an important role in our relationship with God. Prayer is one of the ways we can spend time with God in conversation. Every relationship is built on listening to the other and saying what one needs to say. So it is with God. When we take time to have a prayer conversation with God we will be open to seeing, hearing, and experiencing God breaking into our world. We will come to understand that the Kingdom of God does exist in our world now and we will come to an understanding how we can be part of the Kingdom.

As we renew our Baptismal Covenant today, I will remind us with these words, "Remember your baptism and be thankful." Some of us don't remember our actual baptism because we were baptized as infants. Remember we said that Baptism is given once by God, but received by us every day? So as you "remember your baptism" reflect over your life. When have you received God's grace, God's love, God's mercy? When has God broken through the heavens to make the Kingdom of God real to you? When has God walked along side you and when has God carried you? Then be thankful for this great gift of God's love, for God inviting you to be in covenant relationship, for God giving us this outward sign of water with the inward grace that recreates us into new beings.

