

SERMON: With Us. Among Us. For Us.
TEXT: Matthew 3:13-17

1-8-23

We all love a good baptism, don't we? Especially in churches that believe in infant baptism. We all want to see that baby. We all want to witness that sacred ceremony of welcoming a new member into our family of faith. It reminds us of our oneness in Christ and restores our sense of unity as a church. It even gives us a sense that the baby belongs to us, and it is our responsibility to nurture her in the faith.

I remember the first baptism I ever performed. Heather was a beautiful baby, and it was wonderful to have people in church who were also in their childbearing years. Her parents and both sets of grandparents came forward to be recognized when it was time for the baptism. Heather had been calm and quiet, until the moment when I took her in my arms. Then she began to wail right into the microphone that was clipped to my lapel. Then one of her grandmas fainted. Then her father, who had bent down to

tend to his mother, ripped his pants. But Heather was duly baptized and grew up in the church just as her mother before her.

A few years later, I was baptizing my own daughter. She was just six weeks old, and I wasn't even finished with my maternity leave. But we had family and friends from far away who came for the event; they added thirty people to our small congregation that day. My 3-year-old son, Lucas, had been cared for in the nursery for the first part of the service, but his aunt Joann brought him back to the sanctuary when it was time for the baptism. We were already standing up front, my husband and I, along with two friends who were serving as godparents (or sponsors). Lucas began identifying us out loud as he saw what was happening. "Oh, there's mama and daddy." And when he saw his baby sister in my arms, he sweetly proclaimed, "Oh, Shelby!" That was all I needed for the floodgates to open and the tears to flow. I was so choked up that I could not continue with the liturgy. I handed the worshipbook to my husband and continued to weep. As an elderly nurse in the congregation later pointed

out, I may have been a bit hormonal. In all our family photos taken after the service, everyone had wet eyes and red noses.

Then there was the time I baptized a mother and her two older children, about 8 and 10 years old; a very moving experience. One Easter Sunday I baptized six children from three different families. It was truly a day of celebration. And when I visited the Holy Land in 2014, specifically the Jordan River, I was tempted to be dunked in the water where Jesus was baptized. Though my faith was renewed in that sacred place and the heat of the desert was intense, the brown, muddy water - muddier than the Mighty Mississippi - kept me from taking the plunge. Like a good Presbyterian, I simply dipped my fingers in the water and sprinkled my own head.

It's safe to say that these are the kinds of images we typically have when we think of baptism. Proud families. Precious

babies. Crying babies. Celebration. New beginnings. Welcome. Warmth.

A baptism performed by John, however, as described in all four Gospels, had a very different focus. John was addressing great crowds of people, "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Among those who answered his invitation one day was Jesus.

Though I have never felt a kinship with John the Baptist - that wilderness man who fed on locusts and honey - I can certainly relate to his hesitancy when Jesus came forward for baptism. I imagine myself objecting, as John did, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

In the other gospels, John doesn't speak directly to Jesus, but only to the crowd. His humility, though, is similarly expressed. "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the

straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.”

In Luke’s account, John shows no restraint in his message about the people’s need for repentance. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.... Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” (It is unclear whether Jesus was among the crowd that day. If he was, John was certainly unaware of it.)

And in John’s gospel, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as he saw him approaching, saying, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

Perhaps you are among the scores of others throughout the centuries who have wondered why Jesus needed to be baptized. In your church upbringing or religious education you probably

learned that Jesus was considered sinless, as the perfect Son of God. So, if baptism is about repenting of our sins, so that we may be forgiven, why does Jesus present himself to John?

First, let's be clear. Jesus was not dragged by his parents to be baptized. He presented himself voluntarily. He did not have to be baptized. He was not obligated to be baptized. He had no reason for repentance and no need for forgiveness. When John tried to turn him away, Jesus answered, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

It sounds like Jesus does not disagree with John. He has no need of baptism. But he said, "let it be so." Let's go ahead and do it anyway; it's the right thing to do and the right time. It's an act of discipleship, and serves as an example for others. It's the first step in getting right with God. It's what must happen before Jesus begins his ministry.

As Christmas carols still ring in our ears, we are reminded once again that Jesus is called Emmanuel. God WITH US. God in the flesh, the Divine One who takes on humanity. And being human includes success and failure, gain and loss, pleasure and pain. As one theologian wrote, "Jesus' baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with *the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem*. He identified himself with the faults and failures, the pains and problems, of all the broken people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us." (Dan Clendenin, 01 January 2023, "Why Do You Come To Me?" The Baptism of Jesus, www.journeywithJesus.net)

It is what the Apostle's Creed refers to in those words we hate to affirm, "he descended into hell." Whether hell is an actual, physical place, and whether he actually did go there after his death does not matter. The mere statement that Jesus descended into hell shows that Jesus goes WITH US. Living AMONG US as a fellow human being, he feels and experiences all the levels of hell

that we suffer in this life. Even to the point of dying on the cross, feeling forsaken by his Father God.

Furthermore, as we prepare to receive the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we are reminded that Jesus gave everything - his mind, his heart, his soul, his very body and blood FOR US. He was born to be WITH US, to live AMONG US. He lived and died and was raised to new life, all FOR US.

Remembering Jesus' baptism, may we remember our own baptism, and recommit ourselves to living for him. To the glory of God!

AMEN.