

“Water’ We Doing Here?”
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Baptism of the Lord
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First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7

¹But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Second Scripture Reading: Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”



Sermon: “Water’ We Doing Here?”

One of the things that makes our planet one of the most unique places in the known universe, is water. H²O. About 70% of the earth’s surface is covered with the stuff, and yet it is extremely rare. We know of no other planet besides earth that features liquid water on its surface.¹ Water is necessary for life as we know it. The human body is made up of about 60% water.² Though the average person could live up to a month or longer without eating food, that same person would last only a few days without drinking water.³

Because of surface tension and capillary action, water molecules actually stick together and move up through the roots, stems and leaves of plants making vegetation possible. Water is one of the few substances that becomes less dense when it freezes ... that's why ice cubes float and why lakes and rivers freeze from the top down.⁴

In middle school we learned that water is the universal solvent because given enough time, water will erode any substance. Evidence of this can be seen in the Grand Canyon where over the course of millions of years, the Colorado River has gradually eroded the land, carving away layer after layer of soil and rock, to form one of the great wonders of the natural world.

Likewise, the freezing and thawing cycle of water can reduce great mountains to the finest sand and the steady drip of water depositing minerals over centuries has created the magnificent stalagmites and stalactites that have made places like Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico famous.

Water can float ships, shape landforms and dissolve metal, yet it is safe enough to drink and gentle enough to wash your children or to play in on a hot summer day.

In the Bible, water also has great *symbolic* significance. In the very beginning the Spirit of God moves over the face of the waters and at the end of Revelation, the River of Life flows by the throne of God. In between, the Israelites pass through the waters of the Red Sea and the River Jordan on their way into the promised land. Moses brings forth water from a rock in the wilderness, Naaman is healed in the waters of the Jordan, and Jesus is baptized in those same waters; Peter shows faith and then loses it by walking out to Jesus on the water, Jesus turns water into wine and offers the woman at the well "living water" and so on.

So perhaps it is appropriate that as a sign of God's cleansing us of our sin and making us new, we use water, the universal solvent. And it is also appropriate that as a sign of God's claim on us we use water for baptism - without which there could be no life.

In our new testament passage today, we see that the celebrations of Jesus' birth have passed. Jesus has grown up from the child visited by shepherds and Magi. He is now an adult who responds to John's call to repent and be baptized in the river Jordan. John the Baptist is calling all of Israel to repent and turn away from sin and toward God. Those acts of repentance are dramatized by a ritual washing in the river. The washing is not integral to the process, but by using water in this way, John's message is intensified and made more meaningful to those who hear and join in.⁵

But a question that has always plagued theologians is this: why would the sinless Son of God need to participate in John's baptism of Repentance? Since Jesus is sinless, why would He feel the need to be renewed and made clean?

Scholars have offered a number of ideas through the years.

Tom Long describes Jesus' being baptized as "a symbol of His total involvement in the human condition."⁶ By submitting to baptism, Jesus shares in the experience of what it means to be fully human. For centuries, Christians have worked hard to preserve Jesus' image as being sinless and *literally*, "holier than thou", yet He himself, seemed far less interested in maintaining that reputation. Here, as throughout the gospels, Jesus "identified Himself with sinners and shared their circumstances as closely as He could."⁷

William Barclay argues that what John was doing in the wilderness was an exciting thing that was getting the people fired up for renewal. John was teaching that Israel, God's chosen people were stained with sin and needed to be washed. Jesus would have been swept up in this excitement along with everyone else. Barclay writes that "throughout the whole country there was an unprecedented *movement towards God*.... It was not that [Jesus] was conscious of sin and of the need of repentance. It was that He knew that [His time had come and that] He too must identify himself with this movement towards God."⁸

I think that Tom Long and William Barclay make a lot of sense. Consider these two things:

1. Christians today, have 2000+ years of historical perspective through which to recognize Jesus as the sinless Son of God. But as Mark tells it, it is not until *after* His baptism that the holy Spirit descends on Jesus and we hear the words of God proclaiming, "You are my son, with You I am well pleased." So, it is entirely possible that up until that moment, Jesus didn't fully realize who He was. Until that point, He may not have understood Himself to be worthy of skipping the baptism line.
2. Later in Luke's gospel, we hear Jesus teach His disciples not to take the first seat at a banquet because it is better to take the lowest seat and be invited up to the front, than to take the first seat and be asked to slide down to make way for someone more important.⁹ It is reasonable then to imagine that this humble Jesus would have gone to the river to repent and be baptized even if He did not need it, because doing so was humble and faithful and honored God.

In the final analysis, I like to think that Jesus went to repent and be baptized simply because as a person of deep faith in God, *it never occurred to Him not to*.

As Jesus is baptized, the waters of the Jordan symbolize His being made clean; and His renewal as a person committed to God like the hundreds or even thousands of others who are gathered there with Him. And that's what happens with us when we are baptized, too. Remember in Revelation, when God's Kingdom comes, God says "Behold, I am making all things new." Not that God is making *all new things*.

Our lives are a process of becoming, growing into God's purpose for us. Though we are only baptized once, those waters are always present, always washing over us, shaping, forming us into the people God intends for us to be. God is always about the process of making us new.

But even as the waters shape us, they also mark us as God's own. Ever leave a book out in the rain? Or spill water on an important paper? The other day, Harry, in a fit of pique, threw one of his books into a bathtub full of water. I laid the book out to let it dry, then put it beneath something heavy to flatten the pages back out. But that book is forever different because of water. The marks it bears will always be there, as a memorial to what Harry did that day. When we are baptized, we are marked forever. And nothing we do can ever change that.

But the interesting thing about Baptism, is that, as John Calvin wrote, God's grace is active long before we are ever able to claim it for ourselves. The efficacy of the sacrament is not dependent upon it's having been administered.¹⁰ Put another way, the waters of baptism are effective whether we actually get dunked in them or not.

Which is not to say that they're somehow magical. The water is just a symbol of what God is doing inside of us.

There's an old story about a Presbyterian who moved into a largely Catholic neighborhood. On Fridays when the neighbors were abstaining from meat, he was in his backyard grilling steaks.

The neighbors were so troubled by this that they went to talk to him about it. After much talk and encouragement, they convinced him to become Catholic. The next Sunday he went to the priest and the priest sprinkled holy water on him and said, "You were born Presbyterian, you were raised Presbyterian, but now you are Catholic."

And so, the next Friday, thinking their problem had been solved, the families of the neighborhood sat down to eat fish. But they were soon disturbed by the smell of grilling steak once again, wafting over from the home of the, now former, Presbyterian. They went over to talk to him, to remind him that he was not supposed to eat meat on Fridays.

But when they arrived in his backyard, they saw him sprinkling water on his steak saying, "You were born a cow, you were raised a cow, but now you are fish."

Baptism is an outward sign of an inward act. Our Book of Order says that "Baptism is the sign and symbol of inclusion in God's grace and [in God's] covenant with the Church..."¹¹

In some traditions, baptism is something that the believer must claim for him or herself; only if someone makes a conscious decision to claim God and be baptized can the sacrament be effective. But in our tradition, we profess that it is God's act that precedes our own. That is why we baptize infants and children: because *even before we can lay claim to God, God has already laid claim to us.*

The waters of the baptism mark us as God's own. In those waters we find our identity as children of God. And nothing can remove that mark or alter it once it's there. It's like God has one of those little label makers and each of us has a little sticker made of water that reads "Property of God."

We are all created to be different; made in a wide variety of colors, sizes and abilities. We sometimes get lost in those differences and let them become dividing lines, but no matter what, we share that one indelible mark: the mark of God symbolized by the splashing of water in baptism. By this mark we are included in God's family, made one with all who share the sign and symbol of baptism; included with those who have gone before and those who will come after, in the body of Christ, the Church.

In one of his books, William Barclay relates the story of several soldiers in World War II France who brought the body of a dead comrade to a church cemetery to have him buried:

"The priest told them gently that he was bound to ask if their comrade had been baptized in the tradition of that church. They said that they did not know. The priest said that he was very sorry but in that case he could not permit burial in his churchyard. So, the soldiers took their comrade sadly and buried him just outside the fence."¹²

When the war was over the soldiers came back to visit the grave of their friend. They found the church and remembered the location of the grave but search as they might they could not find it anywhere. Finally, they went to the priest and asked him about its location.

"Well" said the priest, "after you buried your friend it just didn't seem right to me that he should be buried there, outside the fence."

"So you moved his grave?" One of the soldiers asked.

"No," said the priest. "I moved the fence."¹³

Though the world divides us and though we find our identity too often in the company of those who we consider to be most like us, God throws wide the gates of the kingdom and claims us all as "Children of God." In baptism we find our true identities indelibly linked to God's eternal claim on each of us, embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ and enacted and sealed in the waters of baptism.

It is truly a mark of the holy that in something so simple as water we find symbolized something so profound; that in something so common as water, we experience a grace, mercy and steadfast love that is most uncommon.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

¹ "Earth." *Nine Planets*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Jan. 2013. <<http://nineplanets.org/earth.html>>.

² Alway, Carol, et al. *Strange Stories, Amazing Facts: Stories That Are Bizarre, Unusual, Odd, Astonishing, and Often Incredible*. Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest Association, 1978. 41, 71-72. Print.

³ "How Long Can We Survive without Food or Water?" *CBCnews*. CBC/Radio Canada, 09 May 2011. Web. 13 Jan. 2013. <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2011/05/07/f-survival-food-water.html>>.

⁴ Alway, et al. pg. 71

⁵ Byars, Ronald P. *The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011. 30. Print.

⁶ Long, Thomas G. "The Baptism of Jesus: Matthew 3:13-17." *Matthew*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997. 33. Print. Westminster Bible Companion.

⁷ Byars, Ronald P. "The Baptism of Jesus: Matthew 3:13-17." *The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011. 45. Print. Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church.

⁸ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. 37-38. Print. Daily Study Bible Ser.

⁹ Luke 14:7-11, NRSV

¹⁰ Calvin, John. "IV.xv.22." *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume 2*, edited by John Thomas MacNeill. translated by Ford Lewis Battles, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960, p. 1323.

¹¹ "W-2.3004 Inclusion in the Covenant of Grace." *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, 2011-2013, Pt. 2: Book of Order*. Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2011. 91. Print.

¹² Barclay, William. *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976. 115. Print. Daily Study Bible Ser.

¹³ "Inside the Fence." *More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks: 100 More Attention-getting Stories, Parables, and Anecdotes*. Comp. Wayne Rice. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995. 91-92. Print.