

Remember Your Baptism
Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17

*When Jesus came to Jordan
to be baptized by John,
he did not come for pardon.*

Jesus didn't have to be baptized. Baptism was for sinners and Jesus was not a sinner. The idea no longer shocks us because we have absorbed all those psychological lessons about why Jesus was baptized, like Jesus not knowing he was the Messiah. Please put me down as one who believes that Jesus knew. Oh yes, he knew.

And Matthew knew, because Matthew begins the ministry of Jesus with baptism (3:13-17) and concludes the ministry of Jesus with the command for us to go baptize all people (28:18-20). A gospel wrapped in baptism. So why did Jesus submit to baptism?

A core teaching of our faith is that he did it as and for Israel and for us. Christians, for example, have always held that Isaiah 53 should be applied to Jesus. Surely he was wounded for our transgressions. Carlyle Marney says that when the doctor picks up the chart to diagnose the patient, the doctor discovers that he is the one afflicted, wounded, crushed, and bruised.

This adds meaning to Isaiah 42's servant of God: a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. Every time a bunch of Christians go into mean-spirited mode, before they take a vote, they should read these words: a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. We would have to be blind not to see how many bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks and burned out stumps and broken hearts live among us? And if you doubt that, then look at the line queuing up for baptism – there in the middle of all those people needing a second chance – there, see the straight-backed, dark-skinned one, waiting his turn – that's our Jesus and he went into the water for all of us. "Let my people go."

There are angels on the cover of your bulletin this morning, but there should be the shadow of a cross. We should not deceive people about the meaning of baptism or diminish its **deep** meaning (Baptist pun intended). A cross rises out of the water and makes a horizontal beeline to Jerusalem. And Jesus follows. Baptism is a journey of death and resurrection.

Matthew tells us that the baptism is the coronation of Jesus as king of the world. The key words are at the end of the story: "**This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.**" In a world riddled with insecure people, what more powerful words could be uttered? For every person who has longed to hear a father say, "You are my

daughter and I am so proud of you,” this is really good news. ABBA, Father, God, has called you by name and welcomed you as his daughter. While we are desperate for the approval of other people, Jesus receives divine approval. We already know what other people thought of him: “Isn’t this the son of Joseph the carpenter?” Other people cut and hurt with unbending, mindless criticism. Remarks are snide and off-handed, but still they sting. But at his baptism, Jesus heard the only words that mattered: “This is my Son.”

I pray for the day when the church will recover her sense of who she is and her pride in being a people of God. In the *Dallas Morning News* I read a story about a meeting in the 1980’s when the college football bowl presidents – there were only 5 then not the current 35 – were discussing adding sponsors to their games. Finally, someone asked the longtime Cotton Bowl ambassador, “What do you think?” He said, “Gentlemen, I can just tell you this. If you ask somebody to buy your fiddle, they’ll tell you what tunes to play.” Well, an insecure church –desperate for worldly approval – has sold our fiddle to the world and they tell us what tunes to play. The church needs to stop fiddling the world’s tunes and go back to figuring out how to go forth teaching and baptizing the world.

Baptism is not a cute ritual for babies or a free ticket to heaven for pre-adolescents. It is far more than that and Baptists, of all people, ought to lead the way in making sure people know that baptism is the entrance into the valley of the shadow of death, the long walk into the light and the Promised Land. I asked you to remember your baptism this morning. Touch, feel, renew your vows. Baptism is a really big deal.

So write this down: Jesus, not needing baptism, did it for us. He did it for the cause. One day, he was the carpenter of Nazareth, making yokes for oxen that fit well. After baptism, he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the king of the world. From the Jordan River to Calvary is a straight shot – an expressway of following God’s will. We give the newly baptized a lighted candle; we should give them a cross, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit – the entire armor of God.

Matthew tells us that Jesus came from his home in Nazareth to be baptized by John in the Jordan. Baptism is a journey. The first Christians were called PEOPLE OF THE WAY. When James McClendon wrote his systematic theology as a baptist, he chose “the way” as our primary understanding of the Christian life. “Follow, follow, I will follow Jesus.”

Jesus is on a journey. Mary and Joseph **journeyed** to Bethlehem and Egypt and **returned** to Nazareth to live afterwards. They made a journey to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve and he announced, “I must be about my Father’s business.” And now 18 years later, the journey continues.

We have no idea what Jesus encountered in the long walk from the safety of Nazareth to the River Jordan, but we can trace his steps on a map of Israel. Jesus made his way down through the valley of Jezreel to the Jordan River. Jezreel Valley has served as the burial ground of kings and their violent armies across the centuries. There's King Saul committing suicide on Mt. Gilboa, on the southeastern ridge of Jezreel. There's the rumbling chariot of Jehu "driving like a mad man" on his way to killing the kings of Israel and Judah because of the greedy, murderous reign of Jezebel and Ahab. And at the opposite end of Jezreel sits Armageddon (Megiddo) – where legend has it that all the armies of the world will gather for a final battle between good and evil. This valley has filled with the pock-marked spikes of warrior boots for centuries. Jesus is on his way to becoming the king who will put an end to the world's propensity for violence.

Mary Oliver, in her poem, *The Journey*,

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.

But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.

It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.

But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,

determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life you could save.

There are two major differences for Jesus: He responded, not to his own voice but to the voice of God, and he determined to save, not himself, but every life in the world.

Why does Jesus do this? Perhaps all that truth Mary had pondered in her heart she had poured into the heart of Jesus and he now has learned what he has to do. Jesus tells us that he undergoes baptism because "It is right to do all that God requires." Perhaps the voice of Micah whispers to Jesus: "He has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Baptism is a journey of doing all that God requires. American Christians have a hang-up: We claim a status instead of a calling/rights instead of requirements/privileges instead of responsibilities. Some Christians think they are morally superior and go about the business of cramming their moralism down everyone else's throat. Some Christians think they are emotionally superior and feel sorry for those who don't get carried away in worship. Some Christians think they are intellectually superior and delight in insulting the faith of those they deem ignorant. Some Christians think they are biblically superior and have been given special revelation. Some Christians think they are politically superior and we are in real trouble when a morally superior person is also afflicted with the illusion of political superiority. Will Campbell says, "Everybody has to have someone they feel superior to." Jesus bursts the illusion of superiority in his baptism. See Jesus, our Jesus, baptized with sinners, reprobates, and failures. I can't help but see Flannery O'Connor's description of the swinging bridge to heaven populated by battalions of freaks and lunatics. What good news for all of us morally, culturally, economically, and politically inferior who carry insecurity with us from childhood like an old blanket without which we can't sleep.

Baptism, then, is a one-word language for the whole of our life of faith. The water ritual isn't repeated by our baptism keeps happening. Some of us would be good people if there was someone there every day to baptize us, to figuratively immerse us in the water again. Let your morning prayer be, "Thank God I am baptized. I am baptized."

But wait Jesus gave us a way to remember our baptism that our Baptist founders missed or dismissed. My grandmother's people, the Primitive Baptists, known affectionately as "Hard Shell Baptists," practice foot washing. In John 13 Jesus says, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Rowan Williams says, "The church is the community of those who have been 'immersed' in Jesus' life." Are we immersed, every day, in the life of Jesus? Well, here

again is the good news: We are baptized. We belong to God. We're members of the church. God has said, "Behold you are my son and my daughter and with you I am well pleased." We are marked with the sign of the cross and the seal of the Holy Spirit. We know what is required of us – that we stay on the journey, that we be found faithful to our baptismal vows. People of the living God, remember your baptism.