

Today, our Bible story is about baptism. It is about Jesus’ baptism, at that.

So, I got to wondering, how many of you remember your own baptism?

It is a very important event in the life of a Christian. In the United Methodist Church, anyone of any age can be baptized. So, if you were baptized as a little baby, you probably wouldn’t remember it.

My first three children were baptized as babies, so it wouldn’t be expected that they remember. But I do, fondly. Our next two, the boys, were baptized as elementary kids, and so were my granddaughters. My first grandson was baptized as a baby. Except for the first three, I got to be the one to baptize them! That was wonderful!

I myself was baptized at the age of 8, along with my sister, who was 5. One of the things I really remember is kind of strange. I can remember beads of water sitting on our hair, my sister’s hair and my hair, after the minister had laid his hand on our heads. The beads of water were because our hair had been very, very hair-sprayed. I guess my mother was being cautious about all of it, and it was during the sixties. But I can also remember my parents being there, and this very nice and happy event which it was.

When a baby, or a child is baptized, the parents and family and congregation make the promises of Christianity for the child. One of the vows goes like this: “With God’s help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that surrounded by steadfast love, this child may be established in the way that leads to life eternal.” They promise to raise and help raise the baby or child, in a Christian manner, until he or she is old enough to be confirmed. The word confirmation is not just a word we pulled out of the air. Sometimes, a young person may be baptized and confirmed on the same day!

And of course, there is the baptism of adults. An adult person decides to become a Christian, and comes to be baptized. It is never too late, no matter how old a person is. I once baptized a man in his seventies in the hospital. It wasn’t too late, he was baptized.

I tell you what—each of these kinds of baptisms is wonderful. That is one of the greatest privileges of being a minister; I get to baptize babies, children, young people, and adults! I love it!

In the Scripture lesson from the book of Matthew, it was John the Baptist performing baptisms. (That is how he got that name, “the Baptist,” the one who baptizes. It doesn’t mean a Christian denomination in this case.)

Yet, what John was doing had some differences from a church baptism these days.

For one thing, John was not in a church, and for that matter, the Christian faith had yet to begin. John lived in the wilderness, close enough to the Jordan River to perform baptisms in it. Not only that, but John’s baptism was strictly one for repentance, that is, being sorry for sins, and turning away from them and toward God.

John must have been terrific at what he did. He preached extremely strongly, even severely, about sin, and the need for repentance. His preaching drew people to him, and then drew them to be baptized.

His task was to prepare people for Jesus, the Messiah, God’s own Son. As John put it himself: “I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom of [God] life. [The Messiah’s] baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out.” (The Message version of the Bible.)

According to one story, John the Baptist’s experience of baptizing Jesus was like this: “I was baptizing my cousin Jesus, who I thought was just another man, washing him free of his sins, screaming who would wash him with the Holy Spirit. But as I lifted Jesus out of the water, the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a dove, and the heavens parted, and God spoke to him in my arms. I don’t think until that time even Jesus himself realized the enormity of what he was about. And what does one do when God speaks? History talks about men who have spoken and wrestled with angels, but to be spoken to by God? We are in awe that it even happened to Abraham and Moses! But think now, could my life ever have more meaning than it did at that moment? I had baptized a man in the water who had no sins. I had baptized the Messiah. I had heard God. I witnessed the Holy Spirit.” (Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, volume 9, Jo-Ann Jennings.)

How about that? John had taken on the task of preparing people for the coming of the Messiah, a task which included baptizing people who needed to repent of their sins. Such a baptism was a way of cleansing them from their sins. Then, not even aware of who Jesus was, other than his own relative, John the Baptist baptizes Jesus, the one who is the Messiah.

Of course that turned out to be much different from the other baptisms which John had performed! It had to have been the most special event of John's life.

This baptism of Jesus included the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, and the speaking of God the Father.

In our own baptisms, we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Those are the essential words. And, in that way, we get to share in Jesus' experience in a small way.

In the Scripture, John objects to Jesus being baptized. Apparently his point was that Jesus has no sins to repent from, in his life. Still, Jesus insists, and does get baptized.

For that matter, when we baptize a baby in church, he or she has not yet committed any sins, due to lack of ability and opportunity. But just wait . . . it will happen. Unless anyone has had or knows of some perfect child?

However, there are some other considerations, other than the repentance of sins. A baptism is also about starting. With babies, it is the beginning of human life. With people older than babies, it is the beginning of their intentional life as a Christian. With Jesus, it was the beginning of his ministry.

The appearance of the Holy Spirit (in dove form) and the voice of God the Father kind of set a seal of approval on Jesus and on his ministry. Signed, sealed, delivered you might say.

We don't know whether the crowds of people heard God's voice, or saw the dove. Whether or not they did, it was clear that Jesus was getting baptized, just like they had. That made a bond between Jesus and the people. Jesus was identifying with the people, the regular people who lived ordinary lives.

He had come to minister to them, teach them, heal them, and be with them. Jesus being baptized was one way to show that, a kind of solidarity.

Now, in the United Methodist Church, we take baptism seriously. It is very important. We take it as an important, wonderful gift from God Almighty. Baptism is a sacrament. It never has to be repeated, because God does not take back the gifts which God has given, even if we turn away from the faith. I find that comforting, myself. God's love and grace for us always continue.

I know of some folks whose lives are astray. But they were baptized, and in this way, God's grace is with them.

The baptism of Jesus did yet one more thing for us. It led the way, and set us an example. Jesus got baptized; we get baptized. Jesus valued baptism; we value it. Jesus got blessing and approval from God during his baptism, and so do we.

Baptism makes it official. We-- the person being baptized, the family of the person, and the church—solemnly and joyfully accept this gift from God. In a way, it is as if we are volunteering for God to adopt us into God's real family. Like, yes, God, I accept this gift. We become God's own children, and . . . that means Jesus becomes our brother, our own brother!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Preached by Reverend Sally JH. DeMasters, January 12, 2020.