

THE ULTIMATE CONFIRMATION

Sermon, January 13, 2019

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Texts: Isaiah 43:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

Liturgically speaking, thirty years have passed since last Sunday, when we were commemorating Epiphany, the visit of the Magi to the newborn King. That newborn King is now thirty years old, presenting himself to John for baptism. John the Baptist appeared in the Judean wilderness proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." We are told his food was locusts and wild honey ... *(something I just recently learned from a book in our library, and pointed out to me by Emmy Kmet, and further verified by additional research I've done ... the locust is the fruit of the carob tree, in fact, it is known in the Middle East as St. John's Bread. So, it is highly likely that he didn't eat bugs after all! See attached insert.)* As people responded ... and people did respond; huge numbers came from all over ... confessing their sins, John would then baptize them in the Jordan River. On this day, though, one came forward who had no sin to confess. John initially resisted Jesus' request for baptism, and apparently wondered what Jesus was doing there.

I told the story five years ago on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday about a Southern Baptist pastor who answered his telephone one day and a man's slightly-slurred voice said, "Please send six cases of whiskey to (such and such an address). We're having a party." Well, the pastor was surprised; obviously, Southern Baptist pastors are not in the habit of delivering cases of whiskey to people's homes. Even more surprising, the pastor recognized the voice; the voice *(and the address the voice gave)* belonged to one of his church's deacons. Apparently, this officer of the church had dialed his pastor's home by mistake when trying to call the liquor store; also apparently, this must have been some party. "Deacon Jones," the pastor said, "This is your pastor." It got real quiet on the other end of the line for a few moments, then this response: "Well, pastor," said Deacon Jones. "What are YOU doing at the liquor store?"

It's not exactly the same context, but that is something of what John feels when he sees Jesus showing up for baptism! "Jesus, What are you doing here at the 'repentance' store?" John knew there was something special about Jesus, and most likely knew that throughout their lifetimes. Remember, John and Jesus were related. We are told by Luke that John's mother, Elizabeth, was a kinswoman of Jesus' mother Mary, and that the expectant Mary had stayed with the expectant Elizabeth for a while before both boys were born. The two boys certainly had contact over the past thirty years. Maybe they played together as children; maybe they went to the mall together *(or whatever the first century equivalent would be)* as teenagers. Whatever their relationship, it is evident John held his younger cousin in awe. John's baptism was for repentance; Jesus had never sinned, and had no need to be here. So John protests, and Jesus says, "Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

There is so much that could be said about Jesus' somewhat cryptic reply, so to keep this from going into your lunch hour, I eventually decided to put it on an insert that you can read on your own and include it in the bulletin *(see attached)*. For now, I'll just point out that Jesus is not coming to this baptism to have His past washed away; rather, He is stepping up to embrace His future. He is stepping up to accept His *commission*, this is something akin to an ordination ceremony as He commences His public ministry.

As He is baptized, He has His identity vocally and publically affirmed by God ... which, by the way, is a big deal. In the Gospels, this audible voice of God is heard only three times; two of those occasions God speaks and says, "This is my Son." It's as if God were saying on these two occasions, "Now hear this. Let me confirm this for you Myself. This is so important, if you get nothing else straight, get this: **THIS IS MY SON.**" The first occasion is here at Jesus' baptism; God says, "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased." *(Actually, the word is "in", not "with;" I don't know why the NIV chooses with, as the Greek word is one of the simplest Greek words to translate, epsilon nun, ε&v, which even sounds like the English "in." The word is "in", which is an important distinction that connotes relationship ... in short, God is pleased IN Jesus Christ, and only IN Him and those who are also IN Christ ... "Amen? I'm in." but that's for another sermon.)* The other time God speaks and says, "This is My Son," is at the Mount of Transfiguration. He speaks from heaven to Peter, James and John, and says, "This is my beloved Son, Listen to Him!" That pretty much sums up all the Gospel imperatives, by the way: "**Be in Christ,**" and "**Listen to Him!**"

Here in His baptism *(or, His ordination)* Jesus is publicly accepting His calling and equipping and commissioning as God's Son and all that entails; He is publicly *(and willingly)* commencing His ministry, which in three short years will result in His brutal death. Whether you've realize it or not, we who are baptized in Christ are also accepting the same commission, to live and serve as God's sons, God's daughters. Now, Christian baptism is about having our sinful past washed away, but it's also about having our present identity affirmed as God's sons and daughters, and about stepping into the future embracing our calling, our commission and our equipping which that identity entails.

In a few moments we will observe a Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant, something we started doing ten years ago. It's good to remind ourselves who we are, who we've been called to be, and what we have pledged to

be about, which is why I love to do this Reaffirmation of Baptismal Covenant on this day we commemorate our Lord's baptism at the beginning of each year ... reminding ourselves that each and every one of us are called and commissioned in our baptisms to renounce evil, to renounce sin, to turn to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and be His faithful disciples, showing His love and obeying his word to our life's end. That is the calling we embrace in our baptisms.

As you see on the insert, in a moment we will have a Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covent, where each of us will be invited to renew the promises of our baptisms. For some of you, renewing these promises will simply be a stating of the obvious, rather like a couple who has been married for fifty years renewing their vows. For others of you, this will be a time of reconsideration, a reassessment, maybe even a repentance of how you have been living into your baptism. And there may be some here for whom this will be the first time you have thought about any sort of commitment. Prior to my asking you to stand, we will have a time of silent reflection and prayer. Take time to review the insert, and if you are prepared to recite these words in good faith, I will ask you to do something.

In your pews you will find small cups we normally use for another Sacrament. The water in these cups is from the Jordan River, at the traditional site believed to be where Jesus was baptized; we brought this back with us from our trip last February. We don't hold this to be some special, sacramental, "holy" water; but it may add a richer meaning for you knowing its source. If you are ready to reaffirm your baptismal promises, then I invite you in these moments of silence to dip your finger in the water as a way of remembering your own baptism, and place a dab of the water on your forehead, or perhaps touch your heart. You may want to touch both. And if you are really bold, you may even want to follow the touch of your forehead and heart with a touch to each shoulder, making the ancient sign of the cross. So, we will now have a time of silent meditation and prayer; after a few moments, I will invite you to reaffirm the baptismal covenant.

REAFFIRMATION OF THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT AND AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Do we renounce the forces of evil, and all their powers in the world, which defy God's righteousness and love?

WE RENOUNCE THEM.

Do we renounce the ways of sin that threaten to separate us from the love of God?

WE RENOUNCE THEM.

Do we turn to Jesus Christ and confess Him anew as our risen Lord and Savior?

WE DO.

Do we intend to be Christ's faithful disciples, obeying His word, and showing His love, to our life's end?

WE DO.

Let us, then, affirm what we believe:

I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, AND IN JESUS CHRIST HIS ONLY SON OUR LORD;
WHO WAS CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY GHOST, BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY, SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE, WAS CRUCIFIED, DEAD, AND BURIED.
HE DESCENDED INTO HELL. THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD; HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN, AND SITTETH ON THE RIGHT HAND OF
GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY; FROM THENCE HE SHALL COME TO JUDGE THE QUICK AND THE DEAD.
I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY GHOST, THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH, THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS, THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS;
THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY; AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING. AMEN.

STANZAS 5 AND 6 OF "BAPTIZED INTO YOUR NAME MOST HOLY"

Yes, all I am and love most dearly I offer now, O Lord, to You.
Oh, let me take my vows sincerely, and what I say, help me to do
Let naught within me, naught I own, serve any will but Yours alone
And never let my purpose falter, O Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
But keep me faithful to Your altar, 'til You shall call me from my post.
So unto You I live and die and praise You evermore on high.

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. . . . And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. Then went out to him . . . all Judea, . . . And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. MATTHEW 3:1, 2, 4, 5, 6

The locust is the fruit of the carob tree, and accepted in the East as the food on which St. John the Baptist fed; thus it is known there as St. John's bread. It is native to the eastern Mediterranean region; the Greeks introduced it into their country as well as into Italy, while the Spaniards carried it into Mexico and South America, where it is now established. The carob is a sturdy evergreen, growing to fifty feet in height, and is of great beauty. In the early spring it produces many large clusters of tiny pea-shaped blossoms; and brown fruits follow in the form of large thick pods eight inches long. These are filled with a sweet mucilage that protects the flat bony seeds, and are very nutritious. In the East this locust fruit is laid on hurdles and dried as food that is most sustaining for cattle as well as for people. The seeds are said to be the ancient and original weight used by goldsmiths, and instituted from early times as carat weight. Each harvest, one carob tree may carry eight hundred pounds of husks.

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD



The Gospel accounts assert that the baptism of John was for sinners. However, a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith is that Jesus was **not** a sinner. John's baptism represented repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Being without sin, Jesus could neither repent nor receive forgiveness of sins. The baptism of John was also to "prepare the way for the Lord." However, Jesus did not need preparation for receiving Himself.

So why was Jesus baptized? The unwillingness of John the Baptist to baptize Jesus (as recorded by Matthew) indicates he was puzzled by this as well. Jesus replied to John's protest by saying, "Let it be so now, it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. What does Jesus' somewhat cryptic answer mean? One possible explanation follows:

Deuteronomy 6:25 tells us that "righteousness" involves obedience to the law of God. What Jesus seems to be saying is that He was submitting to baptism in order to obey the Old Testament law. Christ underwent the law of circumcision (*Lev. 12:3 and Luke 2:21*); He was presented in the temple (*Luke 2:22-23*); He went to the Passover (*Exodus 34:23 and Luke 2:42*); He observed the Jewish feasts commanded by the law (*Mark 14:12, Luke 22:3, John 17:10*); but what law was He obeying at His baptism?

Some scholars believe the Old Testament law Jesus was obeying by His baptism is found in Numbers 8:6-7. "Take the Levites ... and cleanse them. Thus shall you do to them to cleanse them: sprinkle water ... upon them." Who were the Levites? They were the priests in the Old Testament. The New Testament asserts that Jesus was (*and is!*) a priest; in fact, He is the ultimate High Priest for all time (*Heb. 3:1; 4:14; 5:5; 9:11*). It is quite possible that Jesus' baptism was the ceremonially prescribed act of His ordination to the high priesthood.

Although John didn't fully understand it at the time, it seems he administered to Jesus the sacramental rite that would formally set Him apart as a priest and a minister of holy things. According to the Law, three things were required before any man could become a priest: **First**, he must be thirty years of age (*Numbers 4:3, 47; Luke 3:23 explicitly makes the point that Jesus was thirty years old at His baptism*). **Second**, he must be sprinkled with water by one already a priest (*John qualified as a priest, inheriting the office from his father Zechariah, Ex. 29:9; Num. 25:13; Luke 1:5, 13*). **Third**, he must be called of God as was Aaron, the first high priest (*Ex. 28:1, Heb. 5:4-10*).

Jesus knew His calling. He waited until he was thirty years of age and then came to John to "fulfill all righteousness," that is, to meet the last demand of the Old Testament law for a priest before He began his public ministry. Just in case there was any question, God emphatically and vocally reiterates Christ's call to the highest priesthood so that all present might hear.

(Adapted from pp. 17-18, *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism*, J. Adams, PR publishing, c. 1975)



LOCUSTS *Ceratonia siliqua*
... and his meat was locusts and wild honey. MATTHEW 3:4
Greek: kerition